
A Lady's Quest for Love
Alice Kirks

A Lady's Quest for Love

A REGENCY ROMANCE NOVEL

ALICE KIRKS

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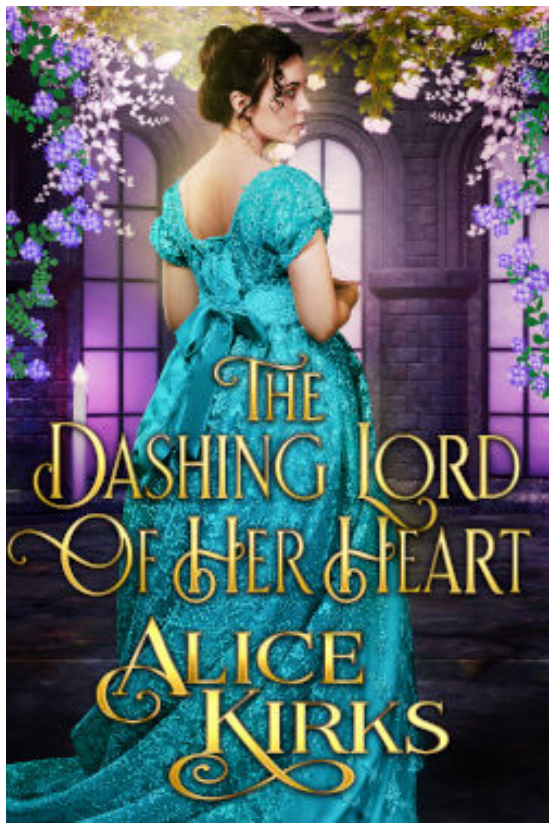
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A Lady's Quest for Love

Introduction

Lady Sophia, the sweet and bubbly daughter of the Earl of Westford, has been raised with the principle of putting aside her own dreams for the sake of duty. Even though she secretly longs for adventure and a dreamy romance, in no case would she ever do anything to disappoint her beloved parents. When her dear father passes away, he leaves behind a mysterious and fateful quest for Sophia- a quest that she will have to carry through no matter what. Little did she know that the quest's clues would very soon lead her to the person who would warm her broken heart and haunt her dreams. Could Sophia's love with the charming gentleman flourish despite knowing her mother would never approve of such a match? Or will she end up following the lonely path of duty once again, letting her hopeful heart down?

Luke Beaumont has managed to write his own life story, despite being the son of the Earl of Astley. Convinced that the high society is a place where he cannot fit in, he decides to abstain from it, opening his own bookshop and getting lost in the magical world of the books. When the lovely daughter of his dear friend crosses the doorstep of his little shop, he is instantly drawn to her bright spirit and remarkable beauty. This is why he immediately accepts when the dazzling woman asks for help with her father's treasure hunt, despite knowing how hard it will be not to fall for her. Will Luke manage to successfully help Sophia fulfil her father's last wish and discover the true meaning of life along

the way? In the course of time, will Luke find the courage to confess his deep feelings and claim Sophia's heart?

Sophia and Luke will quickly turn out to be each other's perfect match and their story resembles a fairytale love, just like the ones written in Luke's book collection. However, Sophia's mother has other plans for her, demanding that she should marry a cold Marquess who could never make her happy. In an endless vacillation between duty and love, will Sophia and Luke manage to break down the walls that keep them apart? Will the two of them find the way to turn their two separate worlds into the most wonderful romance ever imagined?

Prologue

A devoted daughter, an independent man and a quest that has to be completed…

Sophia, as the sweet and bubbly daughter of the Earl of Westford, has been raised to obey a strict code. And that code revolves around her obligation to do her duty. According to her mother, her duty involves playing the piano, drawing still-lives and marrying the right man. And Sophia is sure that is all she can expect to do. But it seems as though her father thinks differently for, when that dear man passes away, he leaves Sophia a quest which she must complete.

Choosing his independence…

Luke Beaumont is the son of the Earl of Astley, but he has chosen another course. As the younger son, he was never going to inherit. And instead of being part of the high-society set that his brother belongs to, he has chosen to follow his own way and open a bookshop.

It is a move that has seen him outcast from the society into which he was born, but he doesn't mind…he prefers his independent lifestyle. As a good friend of the Earl of Westford, it is to Luke that Sophia's first clue leads. And Luke – who is no stranger to sorrow – is drawn instantly to this bright spirit.

A love that grows despite the odds…

Sophia and Luke are falling in love. But what of Sophia's duty? Her

mother does not approve of him and wishes her to wed the Marquess of Cull, a man who makes Sophia feel ill. She finds herself torn between her duty and her growing love. And Luke, too, is torn – should he disgrace the daughter of his best friend? Will the two of them be blinded by their duties? Or is there a surprise in store for them?

“Too fast!” Sophia called, as Emmeline ran down the bank towards the lawn, chasing her sister. The two of them ran into each other, collapsed and rolled down the grassy lawn, giggling and laughing.

Sophia smiled as she watched the two girls – her children. They reminded her of herself at their age, except that where she had brown hair and green eyes, they were both pale-haired. Emmeline had the hazel eyes of her grandfather, and Arabella had greenish-blue.

The two children lay on their backs on the grass, looking up at the sky. Sophia knew that she should probably call them to come over to the blanket – after all their governess, Mrs. Estle, would want them to not spoil their lovely white dresses with grass-stains. Sophia herself didn’t mind.

The rules and regulations of her own home had almost driven her mad.

She watched as the children got up and, still grinning, came to join her on the blanket.

“Where’s Papa?” Emmeline asked. She was already reaching for

something to eat. At ten, she was growing fast, and Sophia was glad they'd brought a lot of sandwiches. Taking tea out of doors was one of their favourite things.

"He's here!" a male voice yelled, and Emmeline ran to him, embracing his knees. Her sister followed, and soon all three of them were giggling, play-wrestling in a heap on the lawns. Sophia felt herself grin.

She heard the happy laugh and felt tears in her eyes. She had never thought she would see two girls, raised in freedom and in knowledge of their own worth. She had spent such a different childhood. She looked at the laughing face of her husband and felt the warmth of love fill her heart.

He stood and came over to join her, the girls both clinging onto him.

"Again!" Arabella shouted. "Let's play again!"

"Once more," he laughed, and lifted Arabella up into the air, screaming and play-fighting. Emmeline lifted her arms up, insisting on another turn too.

She looked over at them warmly as, eventually, they came to join her on the blanket. She watched as they all helped themselves to sandwiches, and she took another for herself, delicately biting into the mix of ham and lettuce. She had packed the picnic herself, though Cook had insisted on making the sandwiches herself.

"You look tired," he said, reaching to take her hand. The children had

sprinted off across the lawns, giggling and laughing.

“Not tired,” she said, though she raised a hand to her lips, concealing a yawn. “Just thinking.”

“May I ask what?” he asked, lying down beside her on the blanket. She smiled.

“I was just recalling myself at their age,” she said.

“That must be strange,” he said with a smile.

“It is,” Sophia murmured. She took his hand in hers and folded it against her chest. She felt so happy in this moment. The sunshine was warm, and the birds sang in the trees of the estate and she could feel the warmth and closeness of the one she loved.

She remembered the year she met him, and how strange the journey had been that had brought them together. She felt his body shift beside her, and his cheek rested against her own. She moved closer, wrapping her arms around him, and knew that she had never been so happy.

She would never have imagined that she could find such joy, especially considering how her life had been just ten years before.

Chapter 1

Sophia ran down the path, feeling the wind in her long brown hair. She gasped, enjoying the wonderful sense of freedom as she ran, the wind cool around her. Her booted feet slid on the dew-wet ground. Her long white skirts – suited to a young girl just a few years after her debut – were light and wide enough not to get in the way of her running as she raced along the path towards the gap by the house.

"Don't run!"

She stopped instantly, hearing the anger in that voice. Her mother was on the terrace. Sophia slowed down to a walk, schooling her face to stillness. She felt the joy she had experienced only moments before wither inside her.

I am no fine lady.

She was surprised to feel the desire to cry. She had become so used to her mother's censure that she wondered that it affected her at all. She sniffed and walked on down the path. She had no real want to go and visit the pond anymore; she just wanted to be somewhere secluded. Somewhere that nobody could see her if she cried and tell her it was not befitting for the daughter of an earl.

She sat down by the pool, staring in. The fountain splashed in the centre, the surface of the green water dancing as the water tinkled into the big stone surround. She watched her reflection.

“I suppose I’m beautiful enough,” she murmured.

She looked at the heart-shaped face, the green eyes. She had a small mouth, pale skin and her brown hair framed everything. She let the water ripple and break the reflection. She looked away sadly.

Why was everything so hard? In all her twenty years, Sophia had never felt – or hardly recalled feeling – as though she was good enough. Her mother was always telling her she was too swift, too loud, too exuberant. She wasn’t a restrained, polite lady. She was a scallywag.

She sniffed. She wished she could be more like society expected her to be. She was the daughter of an earl, and she knew that she had certain duties. If only she could fulfil those duties!

She must be accomplished, quiet and calm.

She wished she could be those things, and longed to be able to somehow train herself to be so. But her own nature was so completely unlike that! Her own nature was bubbly and fun.

She felt more tears run down her cheeks and wished she could hide in the cool peace of the garden. Her father understood her but, since his return, he had been quiet and stayed upstairs. He’d been back for almost a week, and she’d hardly seen him.

“Mayhap he will talk to me later,” she thought. She sniffed, reaching into the pocket at her waist for a handkerchief. She dabbed her eyes and wiped her nose. Then she tucked the handkerchief away. It made

her recall she had sewing to do and she stood, longing to stay a little longer.

"I must do my duty."

Sewing, reading and drawing. She had to do a little every day. Art she did once a week under the guidance of Mrs. Oldham, who came once a week to teach her oil-paints. And of course, she had to dance and master a musical instrument of some kind.

All because she would be required to seem accomplished.

It seemed so unfair! What sort of a life was it, to have no ambitions of your own? Sophia shook her head at herself. If she could have done anything, she thought, she would have liked to adventure, like her father. He went to the east so often! Sophia had lost count of the times he'd seen India, and he'd been as far as Singapore! She could barely imagine it.

"Sophia!" her mother said as she went into the hallway, stopping to re-style her hair.

"Yes?" Sophia replied, hastily finishing with the bun and sliding a hairpin into place. "What is it, Mother?" She felt her heart thump. Had she spotted her sitting on the wall by the pond, in her white dress? She would be angry about that, too – a young lady certainly shouldn't get stains on her clothing!

"Your father sent for you."

“Oh?” Sophia felt her heart lift. “Father! Where is he?”

She felt instantly delighted. She’d missed him! The closeness between the two of them had always been present, and Sophia had wondered why he hadn’t yet spoken to her. She hurried upstairs.

“Yes, he’s in the study,” her mother called after her. “And don’t run!”

“Yes, Mama.”

This time, Sophia wasn’t too upset by the reprimand. Father was here! And he’d asked to see her.

She hurried to the study, which was located near the library room. Her legs ached and she raced up to the door, pausing for a moment outside. She heard a voice call her.

“Daughter? Are you there?”

“Father! Yes! I am!” She hurried in, heart full of joy, standing before the desk. He was seated behind it, the window over him casting golden afternoon light on the desk and leaving him in shadow. She blinked, letting her eyes adjust, and felt her heart lift.

“Come, sit down!” her father chuckled, indicating the chair. She drew it out from behind the desk, the one where she always sat, high-

backed and with a velvet cushion that made it comfortable for sitting on.

"Father," Sophia smiled. "What have you been up to?"

He grinned, "Not much, Sophia dear. Just writing. And of course, the horrible accounts." He was laughing, indicating the books on the desk with a wave of his hand. Sophia smiled.

"That is horrid," she agreed. "Can't Mr. Exley do them for you?"

Her father shook his head. "I have to check them," he said, wincing as he leaned forward to move the books. "Can't have old Exley having to check everything."

Sophia looked at him fondly. "Father, you're too nice. And, what did you call me here to discuss?" she added, watching as he reached for a teacup. There was always a teacup on the desk, though mostly they contained cold tea, or had no tea at all, only the stain where tea had stood, chilling, while he worked.

"Oh, my trip!" he said, and stood to ring the bell, summoning more tea.

"Good!" Sophia said with a grin. "I want to hear all about it!"

"Oh, it was hot." Her father chuckled, gesturing at the windows, "Not like here…yes, it's late summer heat, but there it's…well, like standing

by the oven!"

Sophia giggled. She could barely imagine it. She reached for a little tile on the desk which was cunningly cut into a design. It was from China, her father said. She fitted the pieces into each other, listening as he talked.

"And the trees! So densely grown! You can barely sneeze without hitting one! I tell you, the nature there is so rich and varied…nothing like here."

"What sort of animals?" Sophia asked. She heard the wheels of the tea-trolley, and knew that the butler was coming up the hallway. She leaned back in her chair, eagerly listening to her father's stories.

"Oh!" He shut his eyes, thinking himself to the vast tracts of pristine forest. "Some like here – deer, little birds, mice. Others like you cannot imagine! Tigers, monkeys, and fabulous lizards…snakes and spiders and so many songbirds!"

"Oh, Father," Sophia sighed, "it sounds incredible! Though you know I am afraid of spiders."

He chuckled, "Well, so am I! Anyone of sense would be…those things are enormous!" He laughed, his round face flushed and lively.

Sophia shivered.

“Tea, Lady Sophia?” the butler asked. She smiled gratefully and thanked him as he put the pot down. She poured for both her father and herself, and as the butler placed the rest of the set down – milk, but no sugar – she listened to her father talking. He sipped his tea as it was – a habit picked up in the east.

Sophia stirred in milk and breathed in the delicious scent. It was rich and strong, left to draw for a long time. She listened to his stories – of men and women, fabulously dressed, going down to the river, and the sound of stringed instruments and singing in the dark night. She shut her eyes, imagining the sparks whirling as people sang, the firelight flickering on faces, the silk shimmering in the light of warm stars.

“Oh, Father,” she sighed, “it sounds so wonderful.”

“Wonderful, and harsh, and…well, unimaginable,” he said. He reached across to take her hand. “I would that one day you could experience something like that.”

“Oh, Father,” She sighed. “You know I never will.”

“Why is that?”

Sophia looked at the table, the dark wood only showing here and there between all the teacups and booklets. She felt almost ashamed, too uncertain of how her father would feel about her need to do her duties.

“Well…you know. Mama says I must stay here, and, well…be more ladylike,” she sniffed.

Her father said nothing for a moment, just wrapped his hand around hers and held it. When she looked up he was leaning back, a frown on his face.

"My dearest," he said gently, "you know how I feel. Your mama… well…let me just say she sees things differently," he sniffed. Sophia looked away.

Her father had always encouraged her, but she knew that he would never say anything against Mama. They were different, but her father supported her mama, and she would not have wanted anything different.

"I know," Sophia replied sadly. She longed to be able to be free of her duties, but she was the only child and she knew that there was a great deal of expectation on her. The estate would pass to Cousin Radford on her father's death, and she knew her mother expected that she would be ready not to make a burden on the allowance, which would be much smaller after that event.

"Well," her father sighed, "I suppose I should let you go down to the drawing-room. I should get some things together here," he said, reaching for a book. He seemed distracted and he coughed as he reached for his pen, running a finger down the page, to smooth it flat.

Sophia swallowed hard, feeling a little sad. She looked up at her father's face and took his hand in her own, wishing she could stay a little while. She saw him so seldom, and they hadn't had much chance to talk since his return. She was focused on his face and noticed for the first time that he looked a little flushed.

“Father?” she murmured. “You are well, are you not?”

He chuckled. “Not too bad, no,” he said quietly. “I mean…I have been better. Been worse.” He spoke as if there was nothing to concern her. She could see, much better, that his face was flushed, and his cheeks quite red. His forehead was damp. She hadn’t noticed it at first since he sat with his back to the window, the sunlight making it difficult to focus. She swallowed.

“Father…you will see a physician, won’t you?” she asked. She hesitated, since she knew how he felt. He had survived many things, he always said, and he had no interest in some stuck-up fellow from a college thinking he knew best what to do with someone else’s body.

As she had expected, he laughed. “No, daughter,” he said. “I’ll be just fine. Now, you hurry downstairs. Your mother will probably be expecting you for tea.” He smiled and looked up at her, reaching to dip his pen into the bottle of ink.

“Will you come?”

Her father shrugged, “No, dearest. I had better stay here. I’ll be sorting through my things. And the accountant’s coming tomorrow. I should have everything checked soon.”

“Yes, Father.”

Sophia sighed and went down the stairs. She wished she could shake

the feeling of sadness that seemed to have settled inside her. Father was unwell. She could see that. She would call the physician, but she knew he would be angry. She went downstairs to the drawing-room.

"Ah! There you are," Sophia's mother said as she went in. "I was hoping you'd come down. I was just about to look through the Gazette. You will be needing new dresses, and we must look at the pictures to see what is being worn in London."

Sophia nodded. She hated the London Season but she knew it was going to begin soon, and she would be attending. She settled down on the chaise-lounge and looked through the booklet, which showed sketches of different dress-styles and clothing. She was distracted, listening to things in the garden. She thought she heard hoofbeats on the drive but reckoned it must have just been her ears.

She bent over the book and tried to concentrate.

Chapter 2

Luke paused in the drive, looking up at the house. He frowned.

"This is Westford House?"

He was speaking to himself, but his horse snorted and he patted its neck wearily, thinking that he may as well take that as an answer.

He had been here once or twice, but he'd barely remembered the way. It had been quite by chance, actually, that Luke had ridden here. He was staying with a friend – Lord Caldon – in the Kent country, and he was not too sure if Westford House was nearby, though he vaguely remembered that it must be. Now that he looked at it, he was sure it was right.

He slid off his horse and, leading him, walked up the gravel path to investigate. The grounds were wide and the hedges trimmed, the scenery neat and maintained. He thought it looked exactly like he recalled – just a little too conventional for the utterly unusual man who lived there.

"Good afternoon," he greeted the man at the stables. He was raking the gravel of the drive, and he looked surprised to see visitors. "I am here to call on Lord Westford. It is Westford House, yes?"

The man looked at him consideringly. "It is," he agreed. He was staring at Luke, and he found himself feeling a little uncomfortable. Luke now was six foot, dressed in a blue riding-suit, and had brown

hair and blue eyes. He was handsome enough, at least he'd been told so, and his suit was the best one he owned. He reckoned he looked just about the same as any other visitor they might be likely to have, and the fellow's attitude discomforted him.

"Well, then," he said, feeling a little awkward, "if you could take my horse, please, and make sure he's watered and fed and take off his saddle and bridle? I'll go up."

"Yes, My Lord," the man said.

Luke felt even more awkward. He was not a lord, since he was the youngest son of the Earl of Averley. He had no title, just "the honourable" on the front of "Luke Beaumont". He didn't correct him, since it would have been too awkward, and headed to the door.

"Good afternoon?" he called, knocking. The door was tall, with an imposing knocker. He waited, listening to the sounds around. Somewhere, a person poured water onto stones. A bird sang, and his horse snorted as he was led along the drive. Luke felt strangely tense.

He had not called on Charles for a while. Somehow, he had a sense that he might not be here at his estate.

"Good afternoon," a butler greeted him, opening the door.

"I am Luke Beaumont," he said, not bothering with anything else. He so seldom used any prefix to his name these days. Why should he, when he ran a bookstore in London? He stepped back. "I am here to visit his lordship, the Earl of Westford. If you could take my card?" He

pulled it out of his pocket.

"I shall," the butler said. He took it, bowed, and went inside. A moment or two later, he came back up.

"His lordship will see you now."

As Luke went in, wiping his boots, he heard laughter. He looked up in time to see a lovely young lady racing across the lawns. She was dressed in a cream gown, with her hair loose and pale-brown. She was giggling, the gown streaming back as she ran, and his heart lifted. She was so beautiful!

She was not looking at the door, but heading away from it. He caught a slight glimpse of pale skin, red lips and grinning. He felt his heart lift. He wished he could go and follow her.

She ran down the path and into the trees, out of sight.

"Sir?" the butler said, clearly expecting him to follow within. Luke's head snapped round from where he'd observed the lady running down the pathway. "If you could go upstairs? His lordship is in the library. I'll announce you."

"Of course." Luke paused . He followed the butler up the steps. He was embarrassed, wondering if the butler had caught him staring. He found his mind racing. He had to know the identity of the lovely young girl! She must be Charles's child. She was, he reckoned, about eight years younger than himself, or thereabouts. She looked no older than twenty. She seemed so happy!

Her happiness had touched on the sorrow within him, melting it a little – he hadn't realized how much sadness he still carried, and it was strange and wonderful to feel it so instantly relieved.

He focused on the matter at hand, following the butler inside.

"My Lord," the butler greeted Charles restrainedly. "Your visitor, Mr. Luke Beaumont. Sir, the Earl of Westford." The butler stepped aside so Luke could go indoors.

"Charles!" he greeted. The man sitting at the table stood, holding out his hand. His round face was flushed, and he was laughing.

"Luke! How delightful!" he exclaimed. He was dressed in a long brown coat, a white shirt and brown breeches, and Luke thought he seemed a little overdressed for the hot day. The library was stifling, and Luke already wanted to remove his coat.

"Lord Westford," he greeted more formally. "I am so pleased to see you. I thought you might still be abroad."

"Almost," Charles laughed. "I have only been here a day and a week. Please, sit down. Or, mayhap we can go upstairs?" he added. "My study is nicer."

"Of course," Luke said quickly. He hoped it would not be quite so stifling…the library was panelled and the books seemed to add an

extra layer, making the place swelter.

“Ah, here we are,” Charles said, gesturing Luke to a seat. “Much nicer.”

“Yes,” Luke added. He sat down. It was not significantly cooler, he noted. He was surreptitiously unbuttoning his coat when Charles smiled.

“I say,” he said. “It’s been ages. When was I last in London?”

“About a year?” Luke asked. He recalled Charles visiting. He had come to the bookshop, and they’d spent a long while discussing matters. They had then gone to the coffee-house, and Luke had been quite surprised by the earl’s comfort in the place. It was frequented by writers, students and the politically-minded. He had never seen an earl in there – or not if he discounted Gilbert. And he was surprised by how comfortably Charles had acted.

“It was, yes,” Charles nodded. “Ah, it seems just a day.”

Luke was surprised. It did seem recent. He looked about the earl’s study. It seemed similar. The books on the shelves hadn’t moved much – although he was sure they’d been taken down and put back now and again – the windowsill was dusty and the teacupcollection lined the desk. The earl’s servant seemed to never move anything in this place. Luke leaned back.

“Tea, Luke?” the earl asked. “It’s quite late.”

“I could have a cup,” Luke said. “Sorry I didn’t warn you of my visiting…I was riding and I suddenly recalled that you lived in the area.”

“Not at all.” The earl looked at him warmly. “I am delighted. Here, let’s have tea,” he said, standing and pulling the bell-rope. Luke watched him, feeling that uneasy sense of worry he had been feeling since he arrived. The earl was short of breath when he sat down and seemed flushed, and Luke felt alarmed. His friend had been in good health when they last chatted. How was it that he had deteriorated so much in that year?

“Charles, you are well?”

“Yes!” Charles chuckled. “Yes, Luke…quite well. I am just recovering from my travels. Getting used to the cold.” He gestured out of the window. It was a warm and sunshine-filled afternoon, the wind still. Luke wondered how the earl could possibly feel cold. Then he realized.

“I suppose it was hot in India.”

“Hot!” The earl chuckled, “Like standing in a roaring fireplace, young fellow. Oh! Such a place. I wish I had words.”

Luke chuckled, “I can imagine. Actually, I can’t. Where were you?”

“Several places. Bengal, for the most part. I cannot tell you! The

nature, Luke…so beautiful. I have no way of describing it for anyone."

Luke let out a breath of admiration. "I can imagine."

They both smiled. Luke watched the earl, wondering why he looked so flushed. He was still thinking about it when he heard the tea-trolley. He looked up in time to see the butler come in.

"Tea, My Lord."

"Ah, yes, thank you. And some for Luke. You take milk?"

"Sometimes," Luke admitted. His friend took neither milk nor sugar, he knew, preferring it the way they made it in India. He leaned back, waiting for the butler to finish setting out the tea-things.

"I saw a fine book, just recently," the earl said, leaning back in his chair. "A poetry collection. Maybe you have it?" he asked. "By a fellow called…who was it, now? My memory fails me. Ah! A Mr. Burford."

"I don't know," Luke frowned. He knew the earl was interested in books, especially in translations of Eastern work. He had very few in the shop – it was one of the reasons they had talked when the earl first visited the bookstore. Without that, Luke thought, their meeting was unlikely. Like all Luke's high-society friends – of whom there were only three left – the earl helped him to find new literature for the bookshop.

“Oh, well…I must see if we have a copy. There’s one in the house somewhere. Not in the library…someone is reading it.”

Luke put his head on one side, thoughtfully. He thought he heard laughter outside, and his mind went instantly back to the young lady.

“Luke,” Charles said, reaching for the plate, where the butler had arranged some slices of cheese, “I wonder if you could bring me something from the bookshop, or take it to the house?”

“Of course,” Luke replied instantly. He guessed he meant Westford Heights in town.

“I was looking for a copy of a particular work. I understand there is a translation, but I have never found one. Of course, I can’t read Arabic, more’s the pity.” The earl shook his head. He seemed to regret that. Luke wondered again if the earl was feeling unwell – he was much quieter than his usual lively self.

“I see,” Luke murmured. He made a mental note to check his section of translations of Eastern literature. There was very little but the regent himself was interested in such things, at least as far as art and architecture were involved. He felt sure there was growing demand in London, or there would be when the Brighton Pavilion and the regent’s taste were prevailing.

“Now, about the countryside,” Charles said, sipping his tea. “What brings you here?”

“Um…nothing,” Luke said awkwardly. In truth, he had come to stay with his friend because the city was stifling him. He hated the summers there – the heat, the crowded markets – and he had sought refuge.

“London’s horrid in summertime,” his lordship said with amusement.

Luke laughed, “You could have said exactly what I thought.”

They both chuckled. His lordship, Luke knew, hardly ever came to London. Though, he reckoned, he must have come up more often in recent years. He had seen him every year for the last four years at least. He suspected that they both were uncomfortable in the town.

“You will like the place.” Charles gave him a warm glance. He gestured out of the window, to the hills and fields beyond. “You are staying nearby?”

“With Lord Caldon,” Luke replied. “I stayed there the last time I visited. It’s a good place.”

“Ah! I know Caldon Estate. Very clean.”

Luke smiled, “It’s nice. Caldon and I knew each other a little. We were at Cambridge together.” He ran a hand though his dark hair. It had been almost ten years since then, and he had seen less of the people he’d studied with in that time. They had remained in their circles, while Luke had left high society. Charles and his other friend – Gilbert – were the only titled people in his circles, besides Lord Caldon.

“You studied Classics?”

“Literature.”

“I see,” he answered. “I read History. I wonder why, now.” He gave him an amused grin. “Actually, I enjoyed it. Cambridge was good fun. Glad to be here, mind you. I like the countryside, I do.”

“Me too,” Luke agreed. “Not hunting, mind…I’m not the sort to come up to the country for hunting.”

“No!” Charles sounded upset. “I don’t like hunting either. Senseless killing of anything is barbarity.”

Luke had to agree, though he knew that almost nobody else did. The entire Ton supported hunting, and Luke considered that just another reason why he didn’t enjoy their company.

“You’re staying long?” Charles asked. He put his tea down, and Luke thought he looked tired.

“Not long, no,” he replied.

“Pity. Though I suppose just as well…you can’t leave London for the Season.”

“No,” Luke said warmly. “Though I wish to.”

They both laughed. Luke finished his tea and wished he could stay a little longer. He knew, though, that he had to get back. It was four o’ clock, already, and if he was going to be back in time for dinner, he would have to ride. He pushed back his chair. He had only heard a few of the tales of India and enjoyed listening to Charles’ soothing voice. He wanted to hear more.

“Charles,” he said, “I wish I could stay. I want to hear more. But I have to return, if I am to be back before it’s too late for dinner.”

Charles nodded. “Of course, Luke,” he said. “I suppose I should be getting back to my accounts. I’m expecting a call from the accountant tomorrow.”

“You poor fellow,” Luke said, and gave him a warm look.

Luke was still laughing as he shook his hand. “You take care, old friend,” he said.

“You too, Luke.”

“I do.”

They were both still laughing as Luke went outside into the hallway.

He was walking past the window when he heard that sweet laughter again. He paused and looked out into the garden, but he could not see the lovely young girl.

When he rode home, he could not stop thinking about her. That long hair, her sweet giggle, the freedom of her run. He blinked, surprised by the strength of his reaction.

“I suppose it’s been a long while since I saw anyone that playful.”

That playful and that happy. He let out a long exhalation. He realized, as he rode, that it had been a long while since he himself had felt that happy. She reminded him of it. He thought back to himself, four years ago – how carefree he had been. He recalled Claudia – the woman he had loved, and whose parents had taken her to Ireland to recuperate – and wondered if he would ever feel like that about anyone again.

He shrugged. He had spent too long not thinking about those things.

He pushed the thoughts aside and rode on down the path and into the warm landscape.

Chapter 3

“Do you think it fits?” Sophia asked her maid.

“I reckon,” Jessie said. “Sorry about the stays…they seem a bit tight.”

Sophia exhaled sharply in answer. Jessie came over and helped her out of the new cream-colored dress with an intricate design sewn around the waist. She undid the stays and Sophia stepped back, relief overwhelming her.

They were in her room, and the dress was a new one that had just arrived from the seamstress. Jessie had helped her try it on. Sophia looked around the room, with its white wallpaper and the cream bedcover, the bed ornate and beautiful. It was a lovely room, made up to her taste. She couldn’t find joy in her surroundings, even though she had always found that easy in the past. She knew why.

“Now, I don’t think I shall wear that to the ball,” she said with a grin, trying to cover her sadness. “I won’t be able to breathe!”

Jessie chuckled, “My Lady, I think that is an excellent notion. Now, what will you wear for lunch? I suppose there are no visitors today?”

“No,” Sophia said. She frowned. Her father would usually receive guests at lunch – he was quite sociable, especially during the summer, when he loved to host people. She wished he was being honest. She could see he was unwell. She had no idea why – or how – he was covering it.

“Well, then. The yellow one?” Jessie asked, opening the wardrobe. Sophia lifted a shoulder in reply. She was not particularly fussy. She felt too out of sorts to care what she wore to the luncheon. Father had almost collapsed at dinner.

“Thank you,” Sophia agreed sadly. “I will wear that one.”

It was not yet time for luncheon, and Sophia decided to go for a walk. She smiled at Jessie, who was busy laying the dress out over the chair, checking the buttons to see none of them had come off and shaking out the skirts.

“I’ll go out walking in the grounds, Jessie.” She made a gesture towards the window. “I’ll be back in time to dress.”

“Of course, My Lady,” Jessie answered. “You seem a little down in spirits.”

“No, Jessie, I’m fine,” Sophia said, though in truth she felt close to crying. Her father was keeping himself away from everyone, and her mother seemed determined to ignore it. She sat and pulled on her outdoor shoes, then hurried downstairs. Her mind kept on playing over her worries for him and her frustrations.

Outside, everything was quiet. She could hear Mr. Bentford raking the pathway, and somewhere somebody was shaking rugs. Nothing else broke the silence. Her mother was talking to the housekeeper – Sophia knew, as it was ten o’ clock, and that was where she always was at ten o’ clock in the morning – and Sophia thought her father must be

upstairs working. She took a walk to the pond and then headed out further, towards the trees.

"Why is Father being like this?" she asked nobody in particular. The path was empty and silent and the day was warm, but with that slight melting quality to the light that suggested autumn was upon them. Sophia paused on the path, looking out over the fields. She felt confused and sad and she wished someone could talk to her honestly.

She spotted a rider. The fields were wide and green, and there were few trees flanking the road that approached the village, and so he stood out clearly – a man in a dark suit on a reddish horse. She could see nothing else. She watched him ride. She thought he rode well, but she didn't have a moment longer to watch him because somebody called her from the house.

"Sophia! Where are you? I need you upstairs."

It was her mother. Sophia sighed. She had thought she was far away enough from the house to avoid being spotted from the window, but she must have been seen. She walked back to the house, feeling glum.

"What can I do, Mama?" she asked as soon as she was upstairs.

"I need somebody to oversee the cleaning of the ballroom! I cannot be there…I have an appointment in the village. Lady Dowell asked me to help her with the dispensing of alms on Sunday, and I must organize it with her." She walked down the stairs busily, her long brown dress swishing on the steps before her.

“Yes, Mama,” Sophia replied. She followed her mother down to the ballroom, listening to the instructions as she went. It occurred to her that her mother was either unworried about Father or was deliberately pushing her worries aside and focusing on the tiny details of the household administration.

“And make sure that the corners are washed clean! That floor is so dusty…we’ve not hosted a ball in a year! I won’t have dusty corners in our ballroom…it would be a disgrace! And I won’t have anybody think ill of the Westfords.” She gestured through the hallway toward the high double doors that led from the entrance-way into the ballroom.

“Yes, Mama.”

“And if you have questions, ensure that they are directed to Mrs. Tennant. I’m going to be all afternoon in the village.”

She waited until they were in the doorway. “Is Father going to join us for lunch?” she asked. She saw her mother’s eyes cloud with some emotion she didn’t recognize, followed by annoyance.

“It’s not of immediate import, Sophia. Your task is to do my job and oversee the cleaning of the ballroom. You will see if your father is at luncheon in two hours from now.”

“Mama…” Sophia looked away as her mother’s angry voice cut through her protests.

“Make sure it’s cleaned properly, Sophia. I need to be able to rely on

you. In this household, we do duties."

"Yes, Mama."

Sophia went into the ballroom, blinking back tears. She looked around. A group of maidservants were in the corner, mops and buckets ready. Sophia looked around the room, knowing that there was a sequence things needed to be done in, and was sure the maids all knew it too. She decided to focus on the task at hand.

"Good," she said, forcing a smile. "Now, Miss Priceley, if you could clean the windows? Miss Abermale and Miss Ackroyd, if you can please move all the furniture over there, and ensure it is polished. When that's done, the floor can be cleaned."

"Yes, My Lady."

Sophia felt relieved by how easily that had progressed. She liked to think that she was better-liked in the role than her mother would have been. She certainly tried to be more considerate, simply because she knew what it felt like to feel as if one was constantly not quite up-to-scratch.

She found herself becoming distracted as the hour went past. She wanted to be outside! And, more importantly, she wanted to check on her father. As soon as the maids were cleaning the floor, she felt able to tiptoe out. She hurried up the stairs.

"Father!" she called, as she ran along the hallway. "Are you up here?"

“Yes,” a voice murmured.

She reached the door of the study. She stared, seeing him sitting at the desk, a roaring fire burning, his coat tight around him with the collar up despite the heat. He was red-faced but trying to work, his fingers tight on the pen, his arm tense and his frown-lined.

“Father!” Sophia said, alarmed. She ran to the seat before the desk. He looked up and she could see fear in those dark eyes, along with a need to continue whatever he was doing.

“Sophia, my dearest. I’m sorry…have to…finish this.” His breath was tight in his throat.

“Father, let me help you,” she said. “What is it?”

He laid the quill aside. He smiled at her. She could see how hard it was for him to do that – all of his energy was going into the motion. “It’s for you,” he said, “when you are older.”

“Father…” Sophia said, her eyes cloudy, but he shook his head and pushed the papers away, covering them with a blotting sheet to hide the words.

“What is it, my dearest?” he asked her, reaching for her hands. His own were freezing. “What did you come here to say?”

“Um…” Sophia bit her lip. “I came to check on you, Father,” she said, alarmed by how he looked. “Please…you aren’t well…”

“I know,” he said softly. “I know, Sophia. But please, my dearest… trust me. I know what I’m doing. It will take more than this to bother me. A summer fever…that’s all. Just a summer fever…nothing to make a fuss over.”

“Yes, Father,” Sophia answered, feeling tears prick her eyes. She wanted to believe him, but she could see too plainly how the fever had taken his strength. His fingers were icy, his cheeks hollow. He had been such a big man, but this fever had diminished him. “Please, Father…can’t we summon a physician?”

“No,” he said gently. “No, daughter. I’m better off without those quacks and their potion. I’ll not have them in the house.”

Sophia smiled, recognizing his old stubbornness. Maybe he was right – maybe it was best to leave him to recover. He wanted it, and he was the veteran of so much sickness. She was sure he had faced fevers on his journeys many times. He must have overcome them alone, too, or why his scorn of physicians? She patted his hand.

“If you say so, Father,” she said gently. “But please…at least take some broth.”

He smiled, and she felt her heart twist at the sadness in that smile, as if broth was not going to do much. She exhaled wearily but he agreed. “I will take some broth if you wish.”

She took a breath. “I will go down and tell the cook to send it up,” she said. She tried to keep her voice level. She would be brave. She must be, because he wished it of her.

She was crying as she walked to the kitchen. In that moment, in that smile, she had seen the truth written in his eyes. He was dying, or at least he thought he was.

She went outside and sat in the garden.

Outside, the garden was full of sounds. Mr. Bentford was digging the edges, and someone else was raking leaves as a bird sang somewhere in the trees. She could hear horse hoofs on the path, and a servant scraped pots in the kitchen-garden. None of it made sense.

Her world was, for that moment, empty of sight and sound and as damp and empty as a field of mist. She sniffed and felt tears, but she didn’t feel sad. It was too enormous for that. A knowledge, shared, that she could not forget and not deny, had been communicated to her as she spoke to her father. She knew he knew. All she could do was sit here, in the garden, under the trees, and make sense of the enormity of it.

How could she cry? Her father was dying! She wanted to scream, to burn the house, to break things…those would be a true gesture of her grief. She wanted to make some gesture worthy of all the sorrow in her heart, but at the same time she knew that there was nothing she could do.

“I will do my duty.”

She shivered. It was as if ice had settled, despite the cool summer day. She stood and walked back towards the house. The coldness was inside her, and she did not know how to shake it. She walked up the stairs to her bedroom, unseeing.

When she was in the drawing-room, she heard footsteps in the hallway. She frowned. She hadn't been aware of listening for visitors, but she was tense and on edge. She had no idea who the footsteps might be coming from – her mother was in the village and, as far as she knew, they expected no visitors. She stood.

"Good afternoon?" she made herself call.

"Oh, good afternoon!" a male voice said. He sounded relieved. A man, tall and well-dressed, bowed. He straightened up and she stared at him, seeing he had brown hair, brown eyes and was extremely good-looking. He had a long face, narrow cheeks and a shy smile. She instantly liked him and curtseyed, cheeks reddening.

"Are you lost?" she asked. Somehow, she didn't feel the need for formality – he was smiling and she instantly wanted to smile back. Her heart thudded and she flushed red.

"Oh! No. I mean, a little," the man said, and grinned uncomfortably. "Sorry. I am a little lost…I'm visiting Lord Westford, and I realized I don't know what the time is. My watch has stopped," he added, his own cheeks flushed.

"Oh! I see," Sophia smiled. "Not to worry. We have a clock here…it's quite accurate," she said, leading him into the drawing-room. "Father

brought it back from one of his travels. You are a friend of my father's?"

He inclined his head. "Yes, I am. We met in London."

She gave him a warm look. "That's nice. You live in London?" She was surprised by how comfortable she felt, asking him questions. Normally she was shy and uncomfortable, and her mother led the conversations she had at parties with suitable people. She hadn't known she could talk so easily.

He made a face. "Yes. I wish I didn't sometimes. But, there we are. One can't always choose where one lives." He looked warmly at her, and she thought his eyes sparkled.

"Yes," she agreed. "You cannot."

They went over to the mantelpiece and the young man reached up to the clock, checking the time and winding his watch accordingly. She watched him, feeling her cheeks burning, as if there was something particularly delicious and forbidden about him.

There was.

Her mother, if she knew she was in here alone, talking to a young man to whom she hadn't been properly introduced, would have a fit.

"Um…are you in the country for a holiday?" she asked.

He shook his head. “Well…I suppose it is a little holiday. I just couldn’t bear London a second longer. I’ll go back at the end of the week,” he added with a smile that held some sadness in it.

“That’s a pity, that you cannot stay longer,” Sophia said feelingly. She understood all too well how horrid London could be in the height of summer. She was wishing she could think of something to say, when she heard footsteps in the hallway. It must be Mama! She tensed.

“I should go,” the young man said, as if he understood her reaction. “I must take my leave and visit your father. I hope to see you again, when next I visit.”

“I hope so too,” she said fervently, and then felt relief as he bowed and went out through the door, sliding his pocket-watch back into place.

She went over to the window, feeling confused. Her heart was pounding, and she was feeling happy. She wished he could have stayed longer, and she fought the urge to follow him up the hallway, to see where he went. Somehow, she sensed that, even though her father would probably be happy to introduce them, her mother wouldn’t approve.

How else was it, after all, that her father was receiving guests she had never met before?

She watched the path where the gardeners were still busy at work, but she felt restless. She went out into the hallway again and was just

contemplating sneaking up to her father's study to see if she could somehow procure an introduction to the young man, when she heard footsteps in the hallway.

"Sophia! There you are," her mother said, looking up at her. She was still wearing her cloak and had obviously just got back from the village. "We must have a look at the ballroom. I believe you oversaw it very thoroughly."

"Yes, Mama," Sophia said. She wondered whether her mother had intended to return this early. She followed her down the stairs and to the ballroom. She could see that there was tension around her eyes, and she hoped that her mother was as worried as she was and that, sometime soon, somebody would call the physician.

She also wished she could have stayed and talked a little longer to the young man – at least long enough to ask his name – for he had lifted her spirits so much.

Chapter 4

Luke looked out of the window of the coach and waved at Lord Caldon, who was standing on the terrace, watching him. He called out a farewell through the window.

“Thank you, Caldon. I hope to partake of your hospitality again soon!”

“You’re always welcome!” Caldon shouted back. The coach was rattling down the drive, the wheels churning the gravel, and Luke could barely hear. He raised his hand in salutation. He closed the window a second or two later, unable to bear the noise a moment longer, and the coach rattled on.

“Back to London,” he sighed.

He hated carriage rides at the best of times. They hurt his head and made his legs ache. It was awkward enough being tall, he always said, without having to sit in a coach with his knees bent. At least this time he was borrowing Caldon’s coach. He had travelled up on the stagecoach, and that had been awful. Sharing the space with four people was far worse than sitting in it alone. And sharing the space with people’s foul-smelling lunches had been much worse.

“I should be grateful for small mercies,” Luke told himself.

He shut his eyes, hoping to delay his headache. Oddly, the first thing to flood his mind was images of the young girl in the hallway.

Not odd. I have thought about her almost every second since meeting her.

He pushed the thought away, feeling annoyed. He knew how instantly he had felt attraction; knew that the first thing that had come to his mind had been to press his lips to her own and kiss her. That skin, so like petals! He had longed to touch it and feel it under his own lips.

"Damn it, Luke," he told himself aloud, making himself open his eyes and sit up. He was not going to allow himself to be so fanciful. She was the daughter of his best friend! And, if her mother's attitude was anything to go by, she was certainly not for the likes of himself.

He looked out of the window. The sky was dark, the rain making it impossible to see further than a foot or two on either side of the coach. It was not particularly heavy, but it was misty and clinging. Luke didn't mind – firstly, it meant the drive would be cold. Secondly, it matched his feelings.

Claudia.

He couldn't help thinking of her. The meeting of that lovely young girl at Charles's home had reminded him of how he felt when he first met her. He recalled the time clearly.

He had met her at her father's home. Her father was a marquess, tall and bearded and stern, and he had been hosting a party. Claudia had been there – her red hair and her pale skin and that soft, confusing smile. Confusing, because it never reached her eyes. He recalled her now, his heart aching.

“Good afternoon,” he’d greeted her. He had been almost scared to talk, lest she simply give him that aching smile and turn away, all pale eyes and pale skin and mysterious calm.

But she had answered his introduction.

“Luke Beaumont?” the marquess had said, walking up to them. “Please allow me to introduce my daughter, Lady Claudia. Claudia, my dearest, this is the honourable Luke Beaumont.”

“I am pleased to meet you,” she said, in that strange, soft voice with its lilting accent.

That was the beginning of their chat, and Luke had spent every second of the party trying to talk to her. His own brother, Epsom, had laughed at him afterwards, saying he had never seen anyone so besotted. Luke had been angry with him for that and spent the rest of the day locked in his room, trying to remember each detail of the meeting by himself, where his brother could not accuse him of besottedness.

The visits had continued, and Luke had regretted that he had to leave – his father had commanded him north, to take care of their lands on the border. He had returned after a month and found Claudia’s family had moved on for the winter, heading to Brighton to take the air.

The summers had been the only time he saw her – in the countryside, near Luke’s father’s estate. And, after two summers, he had approached her father with his longing to court Claudia. During that time he had noticed she had become more withdrawn, but had only

put it down to the weather, to weariness, to a thousand other things except the truth.

She was ill.

Her father had been honest with him when they spoke. Claudia was too ill to do as other girls did. She was going North, to her family in Ireland. And that was that. He could not say anymore, nor if she might recover.

Luke had never known if she was well, or if her father had exaggerated his tales of illness simply to avoid him. He would never know.

He let out a long sigh. Sitting up in the coach, he reached for his handkerchief and dabbed at his face, feeling tears running silently down. It seemed as if his heart had been in ice, and seeing that young lady at the manor had thawed it out.

“Nonsense,” he told himself sharply. “Stop being so foolish. That was four years ago now. You should have forgotten about it.”

He shut his eyes a moment. He knew he would not forget. He had returned to London, to his bookstore, and done his best to forget for four years. This was the first time since then that he’d cried.

“And what did you do?” he told himself. “You didn’t even ask Charles for her name.”

He couldn't believe it! He was here, dreaming of a young lady with pale skin and wide eyes and a laugh that glittered like rain, and he had not even asked after her!

"You are," he told himself firmly, "stupid."

He lay back on the cushion and tried to go to sleep. The drive was not as horrible as he'd anticipated, and when he arrived in London it was quite dark and he'd been sleeping most of the day.

"Sir!" his butler greeted him as he walked up the steps of Teasdale House – the only house in London where he'd managed to find decent rooms and peace and quiet. "You had a fine trip?"

"No," Luke said frankly. His knees were burning, his back ached, and his head felt as if it had a boiling pot of pressure inside it. He ignored the fellow's cheery greeting and walked achingly past on sore knees.

"Sir, I'll take the luggage up," Mr. Tanford said as Luke went past, clutching his head. "And, will you dine now?"

Luke looked about. It was dark, or almost – he guessed it was around eight o' clock. He was too hungry to notice. He shrugged, "Yes, I reckon that would be a good idea."

"Very good, Sir. I'll bring it up."

“Do that,” Luke said, and stumbled to his office. Like the rest of the house, it was equipped with cheap furnishings, a rough floor and windows that fitted badly. He was pleased it was summer, because in winter a frosty breeze blew in around the window in the study which no amount of padding with cloth seemed to prevent. He’d rammed a copy of the Gazette under it, but it hadn’t lasted past the wet.

He sat down at the desk and rested his head on one arm, feeling drained. The fire had been lit in the grate, fortunately - otherwise the room would still have been cold. It was dark, and the fire was the only source of light in the room. Downstairs, he could hear the butler dragging the luggage in through the front door and starting to light the lamps. He was talking to Mr. Knightford, Luke’s manservant. Their voices drifted up through the gloom of the hallway.

“Good to have him back. Take the clothes up, eh?”

“In a moment,” the butler argued. “Give me time…I have to light the lamps here.”

“I know. I have to go to the kitchens. You can take the cases in.”

“I’ll do it,” the butler explained. “Just let me get the damn lights burning.”

Luke heard them grumbling good-naturedly, and he was just about to say he would go and get his damn supper himself if they were going to make such a fuss about it, but just then Mr Knightford came in with a plate of stew and a grin.

“Sir! Here’s your dinner. And a fellow called for you. I said you’d be back at eight, and here you are!”

“So I am,” Luke murmured. He *was* hungry, and only registered the last part of the sentence past the delicious scent of meat stew after a moment or two. “Who called?”

“Lord Mainsborough.”

“Oh!” Luke grinned. “Well, if I know him, that means he’ll be here soon enough.” He reached for his knife and fork.

He listened to his manservant as the fellow lit the lamps in the study and checked the coal-stand to see if it needed filling. He was sharing local gossip, and Luke wasn’t particularly interested. He ate quickly, wanting to finish before Gilbert arrived.

“So, I’ll leave you to it, then, Sir,” Mr. Knightford said, going out.

“Yes. Thank you, Knightford,” Luke said absently, already starting on his plate of stew and bread.

He was just setting his plate aside, finally feeling full of food for the first time all day, when he heard a knock at the door. It was followed by the butler’s urgent whispers, and then a loud voice, sounding not in the least angry. Then he heard steps coming towards them.

“Fine, Tanford…as you say. But I am sure Luke will be pleased to see

me. He knows to expect me at odd times."

"But, My Lord…" the butler protested. Luke stood up and went to the door.

"Gilbert," he said, reaching out a hand. The butler, if he had been about to object, stepped back. Luke's friend – taller even than he was, with long limbs, a thin face and chestnut hair, shook his hand, enveloping it in big, thin ones.

"Luke! By all that's yellow! And that's a lot of things, some of them not for polite conversation. How are you?"

Luke had to grin. "Gilbert," he greeted his friend again. "Sit down. Grand to see you. Have you dined?"

"I just did," Gilbert said, dabbing his face with a handkerchief. "At the Tatfield. How are you?"

The coffee-house Gilbert referred to was where Luke usually ate, too. It was not particularly reputable, but they offered sandwiches, and often that was all Luke had time for on his way from the bookstore to his lodgings in the afternoon. He shrugged.

"Not bad," he said. He wasn't about to immediately share his troubled thoughts with Gilbert, however much he wished to. He wanted to hear more about London, and how Gilbert fared, before sharing anything. He wasn't about to risk exposing his deepest feelings over dinner.

“Good. Countryside treated you well? I always liked the countryside. Fine landscape for poetry.”

“I see,” Luke said slowly. “Don’t start.” He added with a grin.

Gilbert grinned unabashedly. “No, I promise I am not going to suddenly start spouting in full-fledged troches, though you actually tempt me sorely, you know.” He coughed, as if he was about to start reciting poetry.

Luke chuckled. “I will attempt not to tempt you. Are you *sure* you’ve eaten? I just took some stew, and I presume there’s some left over.”

Gilbert slit his eyes. “Made by *your cook*? No thank you. If I intend to spend three days raving with fever, I can find better illnesses to catch than your cook’s cooking.”

Luke had to laugh. “It’s not that bad,” he said. “I’m sure that after the last time, he has learned to be a little more particular.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of.” Gilbert gave him a warm look.

They both laughed.

Luke had to admit that, however much he hated London, with its crowded streets and its rain and its bad smells, he loved chatting with Gilbert. And Gilbert never seemed to leave the city. Somehow, his

lanky frame seemed to thrive on the dirty air and fetid smells of the city – and the more fetid and dirty it was, the better Gilbert liked it. He spent more time in less salubrious quarters than Luke himself – which should have been odd, considering Gilbert was a count.

But it was typical of him. He too had turned his back on the life he had been born to, and chosen his own way.

“So,” Luke said, leaning back and studying his friend. “How did the poetry reading go?”

“At Lord Winsley’s? It was awful,” Gilbert shuddered.

“Was the food bad?”

“No, Luke!” Gilbert exclaimed dramatically. “Not the food! The poems!”

Luke chuckled. Gilbert was one of the few people he had met at Cambridge who actually loved their subject. More than that, Gilbert was devoted to it. Luke sometimes wished his friend had followed his dreams and studied and become a don, but he had not, which Luke thought was a pity. He also understood that Gilbert enjoyed what he did.

Essentially, Gilbert was still a poet. He might have written in the fetid coffee-houses of London, and written mostly about topics nobody wanted to read about, like beggars or seamstresses who laboured long hours and lived in awful conditions, but still he wrote.

Luke himself admired him. He reckoned the high society could do with a few more like Gilbert. He too shunned them for the most part, spending his time with all sorts of people in London coffee-houses.

“So,” Gilbert said, helping himself to a pot of tea Luke hadn’t even noticed had arrived. “How was it in the countryside? Really, I mean.”

Luke shrugged. “Oh, it was fine,” he said. “Lots of fresh air, open scenery and clean living.”

Gilbert pretended to shudder. “Luke! How could you stay so long? A week! I declare, I would not last a day without Mrs. Murton’s Ham Sandwich at the King’s Arms. Clean living sounds horrid.”

Luke gave him an amused look. He had been to the aforementioned inn, and he had to admit he was pleased to have survived the experience. But, as he had often noticed, Gilbert did well in such places. His art thrived too, and that seemed to fuel him.

“Any more poems?” Luke asked him. “I wish you would sell something.”

“My work? No!” Gilbert laughed. “No, Luke. My work is not for profit. I’d like to nail them to Parliament benches…those are the fellows who need to hear them really.” His expression was hard. Luke understood his friend's point of viewand how he felt about high society, and he had to agree with that. Most wealthy people had no idea about how poor people lived. Himself and Gilbert were the exceptions – peers who had chosen lives of complete obscurity.

And, Luke reminded himself, he was happy.

He poured some tea. He couldn't help thinking of Charles, and his lovely daughter. As he looked around, he realized that his life was not something he would really be able to share with society ladies. He had never considered it before, since after Claudia he had withdrawn and never really thought about women since. He never went to balls, and when he went to salons it was to talk with Gilbert about poetry and to discuss with publishers about the prices of books. He stayed out of society altogether.

"So, Luke," Gilbert asked, as Luke sipped his tea quietly. "Are you going to join us tomorrow? The fellows and I are going to Tatfield for cards."

"No, thank you," Luke said politely. "I would like to, but I know I'll feel awful and I think I'll just stay indoors."

"As you wish, Luke. As you wish. I shall come and drag you out of here within the week, you know," Gilbert said, pushing back his chair. "It's not healthy, you hiding yourself alone up here."

"I'm not alone," Luke said as Gilbert stood, all six foot and four inches of him filling the space of the small office. "I have plenty of customers at the bookshop."

Gilbert raised a brow. "That's true, Luke. But really, I'd love to drag you into society once in a while. You need to get out of this hovel and at least get a meal."

“It’s not a hovel,” Luke said defensively. He rented lodgings in a large and not too insalubrious place – a set of three rooms – his own bedroom, a parlour and the study. The kitchen was on the bottom floor where the entrance was, and Luke could even keep three servants – the butler, his man and a cook – though that used up all his allowance. The majority of his other expenses were covered by book sales.

“No, it isn’t,” Gilbert agreed. “I can tell you, the manor is worse. I don’t think anyone has ever fixed the stairs in a hundred years. And I can’t afford the repairs. I don’t invite people to my house, you might have noticed. And even I just rest there.”

Luke gave him a friendly smile. “Have a good evening, Gilbert,” he said, sensing his friend wanted to go. “I’ll see you tomorrow, or the day after.”

“You certainly will,” Gilbert agreed. “And then I want to hear all about everything. When you are feeling better.”

“Thank you. You shall. Should I walk you out?”

“No, Luke. I’ll manage. Until tomorrow.”

“Until then,” Luke agreed.

He leaned back and listened as Luke went downstairs. He found himself wondering about the countryside. He wanted to tell Gilbert

about the beautiful young lady he had seen there, and the conversation that kept on going around his head. But what could he say, when he had not even asked after her, or uncovered her name? No, he thought, he was foolish, and he would do best to put these thoughts aside and focus on his return to London, and taking care of his finances.

He had a lot here to occupy him. And Lord Westford's daughter was just a glimpse of a face that haunted his dreams. No, he was here now, and it was time he focused on his everyday life.

Chapter 5

Sophia looked out of the window. The garden was full of sunshine and the leaves fluttered in the sunlight. She was surprised by the tingle in her tummy when she looked out at the scene. They were going to host a party, and she found herself wondering if the man she had met in the hallway was going to be there.

"Why should he not be?"

She blushed even thinking it. He was, in her imagination, part of the local gentry. She could only imagine him so – he was a friend of her father's, he mentioned. But why had she never met him before? She pushed that question to the back of her mind as her maid came in.

"Lady Sophia?" she asked softly. "Shall I help you to dress for the party?"

Sophia breathed in sharply, "Yes. Please do, Jessie. I'll wear the dress with the flowers – the muslin – and I think I'd like a chignon for my hair?"

"Of course, My Lady," Jessie said. Sophia could see from the smile on her face that she was pleased Sophia was excited about the party. Sophia surprised herself by being so – after all, how could she be thinking about a strange man when her father was so ill?

"Is the physician still here?" she asked Jessie, as they started fastening up the buttons of the new white gown.

“No, My Lady…he left about half an hour past,” Jessie said, frowning to remember. “He went down just as I was bringing up fresh coal for the fire.”

“Thank you,” Sophia said. She wondered why she had heard nothing. Her mother could have come to speak to her! After all, it had been Sophia who had finally insisted that her father see the physician – albeit her mother who had actually convinced her father to do it. She should surely have told her! Her heart thudded in her chest.

“There,” Jessie said, sensing the need to be swift. “Now, let’s get your hair done, and then you can go down early and see if Lady Westford needs anything.”

“Yes, Jessie. Thank you,” she added with a nod. She watched Jessie working in the mirror, and saw how her hair went from shoulder-length brown waves to an elegant, sleek chignon, with curls loose about her face, some tiny pearls the only sign of the pins styling it.

The face that looked back at her seemed older than it had the previous day, her eyes tight at the corners, her mouth tense. She looked down at her lap, where the folds of her white dress – patterned with tiny pink flowers – covered her knees. She was ready for the party.

“I’ll go to the front room now, where Mama is. She will need my help.”

She hurried downstairs, her feet in soft satin shoes and silent on the carpets. She reached the dining-room, where her mother was

overseeing the tea being laid out. The doors to the terrace were wide and the normal dining-room furniture was replaced with two long trestles, the seats removed, and some occasional chairs put in their place.

"Joanna! Just on time. Can you oversee the sandwiches? I want them nicely arranged. I will oversee the plates and the tea-set. Those flowers need to go there!" she said to a maid, who came in with a show-stopping arrangement of blossom. "It is our duty to show our neighbours an orderly, calm household."

Sophia let out a breath. She could see her mother was tense. Her face was drawn and serious, her brown dress bringing out her dark eyes and the mauve rings around them from weariness. She looked worried. Sophia ached to approach her, to ask her what was wrong with her father and what the physician recommended, but she only had a second or two before her mother hurried from the room.

"Yes! We need the front door open! Have you cleaned the entrance-way?" Mother was saying to one of the maids, who looked nervously on. She crossed the hallway and went out. Sophia was in charge of the dining-room.

"Thank you. If we could have those trays there…?"

Sophia went to where her mother had indicated, and started helping to lay out the sandwiches on their trays. She felt nervous. Not just because of her father's illness – he had said he would attend tea, and she was both worried that he would and worried that he could not. His health was not up to this – she knew that. She also knew he was too wilful to listen to anyone's advice.

“Thank you.” She smiled in gratitude at the housekeeper, who placed a big stand of sandwiches on the table. “Are the guests about to come in?”

“There’s a coach in the drive. Where is the master?”

Sophia swallowed hard. “I don’t know.” She felt her heart start to thud.

She checked the table one more time, then hurried into the hallway. She looked up the steps, about to go up to check on her father, but then she heard a voice from the entrance-way.

“Sophia! There you are.”

It was her mother, and her heart stopped to see that her father was with her. He was dressed in his brown suit, his face flushed, and his lips blueish. She felt her heart thump again, slowly.

“Mama! Father…” She looked up, “You shouldn’t be here.”

“Sophia! How can you speak so to your father?” her mother began, but her father cut across her swiftly.

“Sophia, dearest…I cannot refuse to attend a party at my house. It’ll do me good.”

Sophia felt tears in her eyes, and he took her hand and squeezed it reassuringly. He positioned himself between her and her mother, standing there firmly as if he knew Sophia did not need her criticism. She stood next to him, heart pounding, and looked out at the guests where they were arriving.

"Ah! Good afternoon, Lord Acton, Lady Acton," her mother greeted the two who came in. Sophia curtseyed, barely recognizing the familiar faces as they greeted her.

She stood, watching the guests file past, sensing how tired her father was where he stood beside her, knowing every bow and handshake and greeting was one more thing, one more demand on his exhausted and feverish body. She hated society! She hated the silly, foolish demands that they lived by. She hated duty!

"Good afternoon, Lady Acclington." Her mother greeted a lady, who curtseyed and smiled fondly at Sophia.

"Ah! Sophia! My, but you look lovely!" the woman greeted her.

"Thank you," Sophia said. She felt sick. She felt her father tense and, as soon as the woman had gone past, she looked up at him. "Please, Father…you don't need to be in this drafty hallway."

Her father smiled and Sophia thought he was about to speak, but then the next guests were coming. He smiled and greeted them and Sophia wished the party was over and they could all go upstairs and sit down.

“Now,” her mother said, as the butler shut the doors, “we should go in and join the guests. Charles, come on. We need to go.”

“Mother…” Sophia whispered, feeling her spine tense. If she couldn’t see how ill he was, she’d tell her! She was about to open her mouth when her father shrugged.

“I’ll go in…just don’t mind if I sit down by the fire. My legs are so tired.”

“Of course, Charles,” her mother replied stiffly.

Sophia followed them into the dining-room, feeling ill. She could not find so much as a grin for any of their ten guests. She felt uncomfortable. If somebody there had been someone she knew and liked, she might have been able to relax. But half the people were her mother’s acquaintances, and the other half were local gentry and nobility and she had the sinking feeling she was meant to make a good impression on them.

I couldn’t make a good impression on anyone right now, no matter how determined they were to try to like me.

She glanced across at her father, pleased to see he was in a seat by the fire. He was sitting quietly, by himself, and she wondered if she should join him, but then Lady Acclington came up.

“Ah! Sophia! You are looking so fine. How long ago was it since your debut?” she smiled. She smelled of lavender, and normally Sophia would have liked to talk to her, but now all she wished was to get

away. She wanted to go to Father and fend off the party guests. He needed rest!

Her mother was cornered by the Actons, and Sophia had no idea if, had she been able to, she would have gone to help him. But, as it happened, Lord Fieldon got there first. She watched as her father was persuaded into a heated debate.

"Father…" she murmured, as Lady Acclington turned away. The party had been going for perhaps half an hour – if she counted some of the time spent receiving guests – and the noise in the room was loud. She had yet to eat so much as a sandwich, and she wasn't sure if she could have even if the time allowed. She felt nauseous with worry.

She was just escaping towards him when another person came over, this time with her mother. He was a young man with dark hair and Sophia was sure they were about to introduce him to her.

"Sophia, this is the Viscount Broughton. Viscount, may I present my daughter, Lady Sophia."

Sophia curtseyed. He had a nice face – brown eyes, a strong jaw and pale brown hair. She thought he didn't seem a bad sort, but she wasn't particularly interested in meeting anyone at that moment. All she wanted was to get to her father!

"Sophia. I am enchanted," he said, taking her hand. "You are enjoying the summer weather?"

"Very much, yes," she said. Her voice sounded overly tense and she

cleared her throat, wishing she had a cup of tea. “And yourself?”

“I love the countryside!” he said. “It’s so…refreshing.” He smiled, eyes resting on her.

Sophia could feel no particular interest, and tried to think of something else to say. She was anxious about reaching her father.

When she finally got away, she was just reaching for a sandwich when she heard a shout.

“Charles!” a male voice cried.

Sophia whirled around and saw her father choke.

He gasped, hand on his chest, and fell. She screamed.

As she ran to him, her mother bent down beside her. “Sophia,” she whispered, “leave him. Go and fetch someone. We need to get the physician.”

“No,” Sophia said, taking his hand. It was cold, and she could see how reposed he looked. Nothing made sense, and she was not going to call anyone. She was going to sit here, with his hand in hers, stroking it and calling him and trying to wake him. “No. I won’t leave him. I won’t. I can’t.”

“Sophia,” her mother hissed, but she could not hear anyone anymore. Her world was soundless and sightless and all that mattered was the hand in hers and the sight of her father.

“My Lady, let me help,” Miss Ackroyd said, coming up. “Here, look… the men are helping him upstairs. Let them take him and Mr. Burleigh has gone to the village. Mr. Wexley will be here.”

“No,” Sophia repeated, as the maid wrapped her arms around her and led her into the hallway. The two footmen helped to carry her father out. Sophia couldn’t make sense of anything. She watched them carry her father upstairs and then broke away, out of Miss Ackroyd’s grasp, and ran upstairs.

“Father!” she shouted. “Father! No!”

She could not think of anything. Her mind told her that the physician was coming and that, apart from him, nobody could do anything to assist him. But she also could not help the need inside her that demanded that she do something. That she could have helped.

“Father,” she cried, sitting down on her bed. Her shoulders heaved, and in a few seconds, tears still on her cheeks, she stood and went to his chamber. His manservant was with him, and the two footmen stood on either side. They were not doing anything. Sophia walked into the room.

“Father,” she whispered, taking his hand. He was not moving and she could barely look at him, could not think about the possibility that…

“My Lady,” a voice said from the door, “the physician is on his way. As luck would have it, he was in the village. He’ll be here in twenty minutes.”

“Sophia,” her mother said, appearing in the doorway, “come away. Go to your room. You cannot do anything here.”

For once, her mother did not speak to her harshly. Sophia felt her eyes fill with tears. She knew what had happened and she somehow knew how bad it was without anyone needing to say.

She went to her room. Jessie was there, and together, in the silence, they sat and waited for the physician to come.

When he arrived, Sophia waited at the window, tense and frightened and at the same time, ridiculously composed. Now that the news had sunk in, she had reached a place of utter coldness, and felt as though her heart had stopped. She went out into the hallway as soon as she heard footsteps.

“My Lady,” the physician said, shaking his head.

“I know,” Sophia said. She turned away.

He didn’t try and say anything, and she was grateful for that. She didn’t want to hear it; knew that it would make no sense if she did hear it. Knew that her life was not as it had been and that it never would be, and knew that she would never, ever understand.

She felt her vision blur and her head floated. She was just aware of Jessie running to her as her mind blanked and she fell to the floor.

Chapter 6

The desk in the study was as it had been. Except for the fact that the papers were stacked away, and the furniture shifted, and the lamp moved from the table on the left. It also smelled like fresh air, no longer the musty smell of books and paper.

The paper had all been put neatly in the top drawer, and the keys were on the desk.

The solicitor had come up, once, but that was a month ago now. Everything was as it should be. But nothing was as it had been.

Sophia went to the desk. She didn't feel like being here. She didn't feel like anything. Her father was dead. The bright light who had shone in her world had gone out, leaving it empty and frozen.

"I need to do this."

She drew in a breath. The solicitor, when he read the will, had stated that her father had left something for her. He said it was most irregular – he had written a letter for her, the testament stated – and it was somewhere in the office.

She opened the desk. Why did she have to do this? Why could Father not just have left it somewhere simple, where she could find it? She didn't want to have to go scratching through his belongings! Not now. It was cruel of him.

“Damn,” she whispered under her breath. It was the worst swear she knew. She felt her cheeks burn, shame flooding her. But she was angry. She was so angry! She felt almost as if she hated her father – hated him for dying, for leaving her alone. For setting this ridiculous search for her. She sat down on the stool and started sobbing.

“Father, I miss you,” she said aloud. In his room, with his things around her, she could finally recall him and the feeling of numbness around her heart was evaporating slowly, making her feel something. Anger and sorrow both flooded her, and she let tears run down her cheeks. Here, alone, without her mother trying to control her responses and reprimand her displays of feeling, she could cry.

She covered her face with her hands and sobbed, knowing that the door was shut and that nobody was there. She could safely cry, without worrying about anybody seeing her or hearing her doing it.

As she wept, she started thinking. Was her father intending her to hunt through his things? Or would he have put it somewhere that she would easily know, somewhere typical for him? She tried to recall where he put important documents. Her mother had tidied away, with the servants, but nothing would have been taken out. She recalled his folder.

“He always put important things in there.”

She spotted it resting on the table by the window. It was a dark wood table, elaborately embellished in scroll work. She reached up for the leather case. As she opened it, she searched through the papers, smiling to herself even as tears dripped down. She could recall how he used to file bills there, to be paid later, with a sour expression on his face. She smiled, spotting a bill for the leather-workers. Her father

always used to delay paying, just because he disliked receiving bills. She paged through them.

"A letter. With his writing."

She drew out the envelope, running her fingers over the neat, elegant copperplate. Her father had nice writing – it was always a surprise, for someone who was quite haphazard with things. She saw her name on the front and her eyes blurred.

"To Sophia, my daughter."

She slid her finger under the flap. There was a letter there. She opened it and started to read.

For my beloved daughter Sophia: A Treasure Hunt.

A treasure hunt. What on earth could this mean? This must have been what he had been scribbling away when he was dying. She slid an opener under the flap and sliced the envelope open.

"Greetings, my dearest daughter," she read. "I have prepared a series of clues to lead you down a path of discovery, to end with a magnificent treasure for the heart. As you love me, I ask now that you please complete this quest for my sake as well as your own. Your happiness is precious to me. So much love, your father."

Her eyes were so full of tears she could barely read further. She

started sobbing. This was so much like her father! He would have loved something like this! He had prepared this for her, and she felt awed by the strength of his love, by how much thought he had put into supporting her.

She read on.

“My dearest daughter. In a secret place, in the room where I always sat, you will find the first clue. That will lead you on your way to this treasure, which I know will delight you. I will always love you, my dearest daughter. I know how strong and brave you are.”

She put the letter aside, actually sobbing. She knew that she would undertake this quest, even if it was going to be so hard, with her mother who clearly would not approve of anything like it.

“Oh, Father,” she said softly. “How can I do this? I don’t know where you would have hidden the letter.” She slid the note into her pocket, thinking that she would come back later when she was more composed to look for it.

She left the room and tiptoed upstairs to her bedroom, where she sat down at her dressing-table. Her eyes were red, her hair in disarray. She carefully tucked her hair into its confining bun and rinsed her face. She was wearing a dark blue gown. It was the first day she’d really put any thought into what she wore, since for a month she’d been wearing only black clothes. She dried her eyes and she was just about to stand when Jessie came in.

“My Lady! There you are! Lady Westford was looking for you.”

“Oh!” Sophia tensed. “Did my mother say what she wanted me for?”

“No,” her maid said, sounding distracted. “Sorry, My Lady. She didn’t say. She just asked if you could come quickly.”

“Of course. Do I look reasonably good?” Sophia asked with a small smile.

Her maid chuckled, “Of course you do. Now, let’s tuck that hair up at the back, shall we? Then I reckon you’re ready to go down to the dining-room.”

Sophia tensed, then hurried downstairs, tucking her handkerchief into the pocket in her skirt. She hung back, seeing her mother was not alone. Why was there a young man with her? She felt on her guard.

“Daughter,” her mother greeted. She was wearing black silk, stiff and crisp. She didn’t smile, and her eyes seemed warning and distant. “This is someone I’d like you to meet.” She seemed almost nervous as she stepped aside, gesturing to the young man to come forward. “Lord Cull, please meet my daughter, Lady Sophia. Sophia, my dearest, this is George Orton, Marquis of Cull.”

Sophia felt too tense to move. Her stomach cramped. Lord Cull was tall, with black hair and an oval face. He had a well-proportioned form; his face was serious and smooth-cheeked. He should have been handsome, except for his dark eyes. They were utterly cold. He smiled, but she detected no warmth there.

“My Lady,” he said, bowing low. He took her hand and brought it to his lips. Sophia flinched, feeling his firm lips press against her soft skin. His skin was cold too. His whole hand was cold, in fact, and veined, and she hated how it felt on her fingers. It was only an instant, but she breathed better when he straightened up. “I am delighted to make your acquaintance,” he said coolly.

Sophia swallowed hard, choking back her feeling of being repelled. She saw her mother’s watchful eyes and dropped a swift curtsey.

“I am pleased to meet you, My Lord Marquess,” she said politely. She could not make herself smile, though she knew it was expected, and so she looked swiftly away. She felt flustered. There was only one reason why her mother would want her to meet a young man, and that thought made her frightened.

“The Marquess wishes to get to know you better, my dear daughter,” Sophia’s mother said softly. “He has requested permission to call on you in the next month. I told him that of course, he is welcome.”

“Of course,” Sophia said. She was simply echoing her mother, but the Marquess smiled.

“I am delighted that you agree to it,” he said, bowing low. “I know that it is early, and that you are still in mourning. I assure you; I will keep my visits suited to the occasion.” He smiled at her, and the smile still did not touch his eyes.

“Thank you, My Lord,” her mother said, and Sophia detected real warmth in her voice. “Now, if you have nothing else to say, I will speak to Sophia alone a moment. I understand you wished to be off quickly.”

“I did, yes,” he replied seriously.

Sophia curtseyed, watched him walk out, and felt like she was going to be sick. He should have been handsome, but everything about him was making her feel ill. The way his eyes clung to her made her want to run away. She looked at her mother.

Her mother watched the Marquess leave, and then went and shut the door. She turned to Sophia; eyes wide.

“The Marquess liked you. I can tell. Oh, Sophia! This is wonderful. You have done well today, my daughter. He has asked permission to court you.”

“But, Mama…” She trailed off.

“He is so personable! And wealthy. We must think of the future,” her mother said, talking quickly. Her black eyes were alight with new life. “We cannot afford to send you to London for the Season, my child. Your cousin will be here in a month, to take up his duty as earl. We will move to the dowager’s cottage, but I cannot afford to send you to London in style. You will have to accept the Marquess. It is your duty!”

Sophia stared. “Mother…”

“Sophia, have you heard nothing? The allowance I have been left is

too little for us both to be kept in the style we are accustomed to. You need to do this. For your family's honour."

"But, Mother…" Sophia said slowly, took shocked to think, using the formal term because she could not possibly use the informal one, not now. "You cannot make me do this."

"Why not?" her mother asked. "He's presentable. You ought to be grateful."

"Mother!" Sophia burst out. "I'm in *mourning*!" It was the only objection she could think of.

"You heard him. He will respect that. Now stop finding excuses. You have a duty, Sophia. Have you learned nothing? Duty before everything," she snapped.

"Mother…" Sophia whispered. Tears sprang to her eyes.

"You have nothing to cry about," her mother said firmly.

Sophia felt her stomach heave, and she ran to the door. "Excuse me…" She knew she was going to be sick. She raced to her bedroom and managed to get to the fireplace before her stomach rebelled, leaving her exhausted and empty, on her knees by the fireplace.

"Oh, My Lady…" Jessie said, coming in very soon. "Let me help. Do you want to get back into bed?"

“I’m not ill, truly,” Sophia whispered. She wished she was. She just wanted to crawl into bed and never get out again.

The thought of the Marquess was horrifying to her.

“Oh, My Lady, are you sure?” her maid insisted, reaching for the pitcher of water on the table, and taking out her cleaning cloth. “You should rest, Lady Sophia. I’ll go down and fetch something to clean this up with. We’ll have it right as rain in no time…”

“Thank you,” Sophia whispered. She sat down on the bed, shut her eyes and tried to rest. She wished that she could forget about her mother’s words, but they were etched indelibly in her mind. *It is your duty.*

“Now, we’re all done. You get into bed and I’ll get something to warm your feet. You just need to sleep, My Lady. Would you like some broth?”

“I’m fine,” Sophia whispered. “Thank you, Jessie. I just want to be alone.”

“Very well, My Lady.”

Sophia leaned back on the bed, trying to think. She could not let her mother do this to her. She could not court that man, wed that man! She could not let this happen.

It is your duty.

She rested her chin in her hands and groaned. She could not escape that.

She could not forget that.

Her mother was right.

She had been born into privilege, and this was the other side of that privilege, and she knew she had been raised to think like that. She had to maintain the honour of the family and their standing in society. They were all counting on her. Even her cousin would need her to ensure that her and Mama were kept in a style appropriate to them.

“I can’t do it,” she whispered to the silence. “I cannot do this. Please, help me.”

She found herself talking to her father, wishing he was there. He would know what to do. He would know the answer. “Please, Father,” she murmured into the silence, as if he was before her. “Please, help me. You would know what to do. You would understand. Please, help me to do my duty.”

She sobbed, tears running down her cheeks. As she sat there, she recalled something. Her father had left her a clue, somewhere in this house. She took the letter out of her pocket, scanning it hastily again.

“In the room where I always sat,” she said, reading the letter aloud again and then slipping it back into her pocket. That was his study.

Standing, she tiptoed across the floor and out of the door, going along the corridor towards the stairs to the study. She tensed, hearing footsteps, but it was only Jessie going to her room. She hurried past, going to the library, then across and into her father’s room. She shut the door.

“Where would he have hidden it?” she asked herself.

She looked around and took the letter out of her pocket again, reading through it. Somewhere in the letter was a clue. She read it carefully and found, for the first time since she’d met him, the Marquess slipping out of her thoughts, replaced by her need to find the note her father had written.

Chapter 7

Luke looked up as a customer came into the bookshop. At least, he had thought and hoped it was a customer – it was a gloomy, rainy day and he had been in the bookshop for three hours without seeing a soul besides the man who came in to clean the pavement outside the row of little boutiques.

"Luke!"

"Gilbert," Luke greeted his lanky friend, who came and perched on the table, looking quizzically at him.

"Luke. How is business?" Gilbert asked. "I was just passing by on my way to the market, and I thought I'd drop in and find out how the shop is going." He looked around, taking in the shelves full of books, the table in the front with a display of books on it, the curtains drawn back from the one side window, letting in pale daylight to light the place.

"Business is, well…usual for a rainy weekday morning," Luke said lightly. "How are you, Gilbert?"

"Oh, fine as ever," his friend said, giving his back a twist and a click. "I'm healthy, happy and on the hunt for decent food. Want to join me at the coffee-house? I'm buying – my allowance just arrived yesterday."

"Oh!" Luke raised a brow. "Good for you," he said. His own had come

in last month, and he'd paid the servants and the rent. He was worrying about this month – even with the saving of a week's money on food, he still had concerns about what he was going to eat. "Thank you, Gilbert. That's thoughtful of you. I suppose it's almost time for lunch now?" he added, checking his watch.

"Yes, it is," Gilbert agreed. "If you're coming, we can go over now. The market can wait…I'm looking for a decent pomade, since I'm going to be invited to a salon tomorrow, and I might as well look reasonably good." He looked at him with an amused expression.

"That sounds good," Luke said in reply. He slipped the watch into his pocket, remembering, as he did so, the girl. He wondered how she fared. He made a note to write to Charles, and this time ask him about the young lady.

He stood and followed his friend into the street, puffing out his cheeks with surprise as he felt the sudden cold. "That's not what I expected," he said, drawing his greatcoat shut. "It's supposed to be summer."

"That's London weather," Gilbert said mildly, looking up at the sky. "Changeable. I'm glad I brought my coat." He pulled it shut and they walked swiftly along the road, stepping neatly around the people streaming up and down the street. They reached the coffee-house and went in, shrugging out of their coats and taking a seat by the window, where they always sat.

"I say, it's good to be indoors," Gilbert said, blowing on his fingers.

"It is," Luke agreed. He narrowed his eyes, looking around Tatfield's coffee-house.

The Gazette had been left on the table, along with a tray with an empty coffee-cup, which the proprietor – an older man in a blue suit, threadbare at the hems – hurried to lift out of their way. “So sorry, Sir, My Lord,” he apologized to them swiftly. “Shall I get the usual?”

“Coffee and ham sandwiches,” Gilbert agreed. “That right, Luke?”

“Yes,” Luke said, feeling a little disorientated. “Thank you.”

The street had been cold, but inside the coffee-house it was hot. The tables were all occupied and the warmth of so many bodies packed together was stifling, added to by the fireplace in the corner, and the heat of the lanterns. He shifted his cravat, feeling it was too tight. Gilbert shot him a friendly look.

“You seem uncomfortable.”

Luke shrugged, “Damn hot in here. And cold out on the street. I know I’m full of complaints today,” he added with a small grin. “I just don’t feel settled.” He looked around the coffee-house. People of all sorts sat there – lords, tradesmen and intellectuals, most of them fairly shabby in their dress.

Two men dressed in slightly threadbare velvet were having an argument about some political article in the Gazette, gesturing and talking. He thought they looked angry and wondered if anyone would need to separate a fist-fight.

At the table beside them, two merchants were grumbling about prices. He could hear the word “pounds” mumbled almost incessantly, a backdrop to the noise and laughter in the rest of the shop. A poet was in the corner, a book on the table, writing. Luke felt ill and fanned himself with one hand, trying to cool off.

“You really don’t look the ticket, old chap,” his friend said, frowning. “Should we go? We can eat somewhere else, you know. It is hot in here, I think.”

“No, no…it’s fine,” Luke said, hearing the proprietor come back in from the kitchen, and reckoning their sandwiches were on the way. “I just need something to eat.”

“I couldn’t agree more, really not,” Gilbert agreed fervently. He accepted his plate, thanked the proprietor, and tackled his sandwich instantly. Luke followed his example, feeling slightly better the moment he tasted the first familiar mouthful of ham sandwich.

“So,” Luke asked him, watching Gilbert watching two women in the street, his eyes following them as if he was attached to them with invisible cotton. “Where is this salon?”

“At Lord Tulbridge’s,” he said. He made a face, sipped his coffee and made another face, reaching for the sugar. “So, most of the people there will be the usual group – ordinary and tiresome as usual.” He gave him a friendly look. “That’s better.”

“And nobody you’re interested in?” Luke asked, raising a brow.

“No,” Gilbert said slowly. “What makes you think that, Luke?”

“No sign of Amelia?”

“No,” Gilbert said firmly. “Not at all. What makes you think that, Luke?”

“No reason,” Luke said, still grinning. “I just wondered at your intention to make sure you look presentable. Usually, you’re not that concerned with appearance.”

Gilbert took another sip of his coffee, looking out of the window. “I am no more concerned than usual,” he said, in a small, tight voice that quite convinced Luke that he was keen on meeting someone there.

He just smiled and bit into his sandwich, sure that Gilbert would divulge the information at a later time. He looked around, half-tempted to tell Gilbert about his own strange meeting with the young lady at the country estate. He was surprised that, though a month had passed, when he wound his watch and set the time, he still sometimes thought of her.

“Should we go?” he asked Gilbert, noticing the time on the big clock on the mantelpiece. “I should get back to the shop.”

“And I should get to the market,” Gilbert agreed. “Shall we meet tomorrow for cards? I’m worried about you, Luke…you keep yourself to yourself too much, you know.”

“I’m fine, Gilbert,” Luke said, standing and reaching for his hat and coat, which were hanging by the door. “You know me…I’m the sort who likes to keep themselves to themselves.”

“I know,” Gilbert agreed, sounding uncertain. “Well, anytime you’d like to come and play cards, you know I’d be more than happy.”

“Thank you, Gilbert. I might do that,” he agreed. He shook his friend’s hand and Gilbert headed to the marketplace, while Luke went left, back up the street towards the bookshop. He opened up, received a customer, sold him a pound’s worth of books and felt a little better. He was just reaching to tidy a shelf when someone came in.

“Mr. Beaumont?”

“Yes, that’s me,” Luke said with a frown. “Is that a letter?” he gestured to the letter in the man’s hand. The man, evidently a post-delivery man of some sort, cleared his throat.

“It is, Sir.”

“Thank you, then,” Luke answered, distractedly taking the letter. He waited until the fellow had left before he sat down at his desk and opened it. He frowned.

“Honourable Mr. Beaumont,” he read, his frown deepening. “I am writing to you on behalf of my client, Lord Westford, who wished me to leave a letter with you in his will. I regret to inform you of his

recent passing. I apologize for the lateness of this letter, but it took my partners a while to determine your location…"

Luke put the letter down, feeling stunned. Charles had gone!

"No," he whispered. He couldn't believe it. His wonderful, lively friend, not part of the world? He didn't want to believe it. He couldn't have been that ill.

He slid the letter out of the envelope. It was in a much smaller envelope, with a tiny rendering of a name on the paper. Luke frowned. There was a second letter there, folded, with his name on it. He unfolded it, setting the small envelope aside.

"Luke," he read aloud, "I am asking you a favour, but I trust absolutely that you will carry it out."

He read through the letter, frowning. He set it aside. None of it made sense.

He slipped the letter, and the small envelope, into his desk drawer, locked the drawer, and stood.

"Perhaps I will go to the party with Gilbert after all," he decided.

He did not feel like being alone, with so much on his mind.

He tidied up the shop, wrote entries into his accounts book, collected the cash into the cashbox and locked it. By the time it was his usual moment for closing the shop, he was ready to leave and already going up the street towards Gilbert's house – he needed someone to talk to, as Gilbert had said.

"Gilbert," he called as he went up the steps, walking silently past Gilbert's butler, who let him into the cold room. "Where are you?"

"Here!" Gilbert shouted from his bedroom on the second floor of the Heights. "Come on up. You can tell me how I look in this suit."

Luke felt some of the ice thaw around his heart, and knew how glad he was to see Gilbert. "Gilbert, you look grand," he said, barely glancing at his friend in the navy velvet. "I think I might like to come with you, after all."

He needed to go out. He found his mind wandering to Charles' daughter, and how she fared, and he pushed the thought swiftly aside – he was in mourning too, and he did not want anything troubling an already-burdened mind.

Chapter 8

Sophia looked around the study. She had been called away the previous day to dinner, but now she had plenty of time that morning to look for the note. Her mother was visiting Lady Acton and she could finally spend an hour or two searching Father's study.

"Where would he hide a letter to me?"

She had searched all the surfaces and all the piles that had been locked neatly away in the cupboard by the housekeeper. None of them had revealed anything, and she was starting to feel desperate. She opened the case of papers by the window and took the remaining sheets out. Most were blank, and some were just accounting.

There was no envelope there.

In desperation she threw open his desk, hunting around inside it, her hands flat on the bottom. As she did, her fingers brushed something.

A lever.

"A hidden drawer!"

She almost shouted it, then covered her mouth with one hand, lest excitement alert Jessie or one of the other maids to her search. She felt a need to keep it all secret. She felt around in the desk and pulled

the lever.

At first nothing happened, but, as she pulled it forward, a tiny click sounded. A drawer sprung open in the back.

“Oh, Father…” Sophia whispered. This was so like him! A wild adventure, right here in her house, complete with hidden letters in secret containers! She took the letter out, feeling her heart lift.

She opened the tiny envelope and read the words. They were written in his surprisingly-neat handwriting, small and delicate.

“Using the code we used when you were ten years old,” he wrote, “decode the paragraph below.”

Sophia sat with the letter on her knee, frowning.

“Code,” she whispered, “what on earth did we do when I was ten? Think, Sophia, think.”

Miraculously, the solution was suddenly there: the third letter in every second word!

She heard someone coming and, closing the door, she fled back to her room. There she looked at the paper again. Every third letter of every second word. Slowly she decoded the paragraph.

“At the centre of the biggest city in England, in Piccadilly Road, there is a secluded book shop. Speak to the man you shall find there. He is the owner of the establishment, and a gentleman. It is he who has your next clue. Remember, my daughter, not all rules are good rules. Always ask yourself: what and who was this rule made for? Who benefits from obedience to this rule? Then you will know if this rule is for you or against you.”

She sat on her bed and gazed into nowhere. That was an interesting question. Which rule and which context was he referring to? she wondered. Rules were everywhere. Her mother had so many. Maybe he meant her mother’s rules. She must think about that.

But first, she needed to persuade her mother to go to London, or at least allow her to go with her chaperone.

She took a deep breath. It was a month since she had put on the black mourning dress. Already, it was possible for the family to undertake visits, and she had moved on to other dark colours such as navy. She could reasonably go to London, provided that she did not attend balls or parties – as if she wished to! No, she was sure that, once her mother understood the nature of her trip, she would have to concede.

She rang the bell and summoned Jessie.

“Can you do my hair, please?” she asked. She sat down at the dressing-table, surveying her tear-stained face. Her hair had come down from its bun, but when the tears were rinsed and her hair rearranged, she would look presentable. “And do you know if Jane would be available to go somewhere with me?”

“Oh, My Lady! I’d be happy to ask... She lives in the village not too far from me. Does that mean you’re coming out of mourning, My Lady?”

“Not for another month. But I have to travel,” Sophia said firmly.

“Oh! How exciting! I’ll go to the village right now, with your permission, My Lady?”

Sophia took a deep breath. First, she would have to ask her mother for permission. “In a moment. Thank you, Jessie. I will let you know in an hour.”

“Yes, My Lady.”

Sophia went swiftly downstairs to find her mother. She found her in the drawing-room. Her expression was stern.

“Mama…” Sophia felt her resolve waver. She had come down here straight-backed, ready to tell her mother about the quest and request leave to stay in Westford House in London. But now she felt afraid, those dark eyes reminding her that she had to do her duty.

“What is it, Sophia?” her mother said swiftly. “I am in a hurry, so please be quick. I need to go to the church to help with the alms-giving.”

“Mama…” Sophia wet her lips. “Please…I was left that letter by Father, remember? In his will? Well, I found it, and it says I should go

to London."

"What?" her mother snapped. "Sophia, this is irregular. Why would your father want you to travel? And now, of all times? This is foolish! What is this all supposed to be?"

Sophia took a deep breath. She had never actually argued with anything before, and she wasn't sure she knew how to start. But this was her father's behest! She had to try and do it. "Mama…Father left me a letter. It was in his desk. I found it. He says he has left me something that I have to find. And that, to get it, I must go to London." She summarized it as indirectly as she could.

"Why would he leave it there? Why not with Mr. Bulton, the solicitor?"

"Well…he wished me to find it. It says so in the letter. I believe it is important, or he would have just left it here."

Her mother raised a brow. "Sophia…this is foolish. Why should you go all the way to London? You are still in mourning!"

Sophia felt anger replace her fear. "Mama! I am already coming out of mourning. And that isn't what you said when the Marquess asked me to walk."

"No," her mother admitted, though she sounded angry about Sophia being right. "Well…you could go. You are right that, in itself, it isn't outside custom. But still, I cannot sanction this. The Marquess will expect you to be here."

“Mama!” Sophia said, surprised. Was her mother really objecting because of custom, or because of Marquesses? An idea hit her. “But… Mama…isn’t the Marquess going to London?” she asked. She seemed to recall that he would leave the countryside the next day.

“Yes, he is,” her mother replied swiftly. Then Sophia saw her pause. “Yes, he is. Sophia, you cannot go to balls and parties in London! It would be most irregular.” She straightened up swiftly. “But, since the Marquess will be in London, you could be seen to be going there in service to this letter from your father.” She raised a brow, “Yes, you may go.”

“Mama!” Sophia went pink. “But, Mama…I might not see the Marquess when I am there,” she said hastily. She didn’t want to lie. She didn’t want to have to see the Marquess in London, and she didn’t feel comfortable with outwitting her mother. “What if my letter from Father leads me only to Westford House…? And I cannot go out to public occasions, as you say.”

“Yes,” her mother agreed. “But if he *discovered* you were in London, quite naturally, of course – I wouldn’t want him to think we were trying to force him – it would be all too natural for him to call on you.”

“Yes…” Sophia swallowed hard. As it happened, the idea didn’t oblige her to do anything. Her mother wouldn’t even tell the Marquess she was there! She could simply keep a low profile, hope that he never found out, and undertake whatever business her father wished her to do without any difficulties.

“Well, then, it’s settled,” her mother said firmly. “I cannot spare you

longer than two weeks – the Marquess will be in London for three weeks. So; three weeks at the very most. You may go. I cannot come with you, of course – I'm far too busy here, readying matters for your cousin. So, you must be accompanied by another."

"I'll take Jane with me," Sophia said swiftly. "I can send for her today and leave tomorrow, if you wish."

"Tomorrow!" her mother raised a brow. "Well…how about the next day, Sophia? I think that would be appropriate. You will need a day to pack, to make sure you have all your appropriate clothing – dark gowns, dark bonnets, dark shoes – and it will look better if you don't leave immediately. Are we agreed?"

"Yes, Mama," Sophia said. She replied demurely, but inside her heart was glowing as bright as a fire. She could go to London! She would finally be able to complete the quest set out by her father.

Chapter 9

Sophia watched the buildings slide past, the coach rattling swiftly over the cobbled roads. It was raining, the rain striking the panes of the coach and the wheels sliding and bumping on the surface in a way that made her grit her teeth and hang on.

"Almost in London," Jane commented.

Sophia was too tense for speaking. The motion of the coach sickened her, and besides, she was frightened of what would happen next.

The journey had taken the whole of the previous day. They had departed Westford at ten o' clock in the morning after a tense breakfast with her mother and a formal farewell. They'd travelled for six hours and stopped overnight at the Soldier's Arms – one of the better inns. It had been a cold, uncomfortable night upstairs – despite taking their best room – and then they'd set out again at eight o' clock in the morning.

Now, around midday, they were getting close.

"The London House will be comfortable, I reckon," Jane said quietly. A woman in her late thirties, Jane was married and had two children, and was considered a suitable chaperone for a young lady. Sophia looked across at her calm, soft face and wondered what it would be like to be sharing the London house with her for two or three weeks.

She felt a tingle of excitement in her tummy. She had never been on

an adventure before.

This was it! A real adventure.

“Whoa! Slow down, there,” the coachman called. He pulled the reins and their horses slowed, the sound eerie in the dark afternoon. Sophia leaned out of the window in time to see a horseman pass them, going back north.

She studied the landscape. The road was grey, the sky pewter, and the wet grass was grey-touched green. The entire landscape seemed haunted and abandoned, and Sophia felt her excitement rise. She was alone – except for the company of Jane and Jessie – and she was going to London!

Her fingers stroked the velvet of her purse, clutched by its drawstring handle. Her father’s note was in there, carried on her person. She knew that, without the letter, her quest couldn’t start.

A shop in Piccadilly Road.

Her stomach cramped with excitement, and when she looked out of the window, she saw that the landscape had changed – the wide fields and occasional trees and pewter sky had given way to houses, grey cobbles and a thin slice of clouded greyness between roofs.

They were here! They were in London.

“Oh, My Lady! Isn’t it exciting?” Jane asked comfortably.

“Yes,” Sophia murmured. She felt tense – excited, yes, and frightened. She had a quest to complete, single-handed. She had never even been out of the house alone before!

The coach rolled between the houses, the sound of the horses’ hoofs rattling and loud where they echoed from the walls. She looked out, seeing the narrow street give way to a wider street, with pavements along which people walked. At first, the people were plainly dressed, clutching brown cloaks and coats about them for warmth, going to stalls or shops and back to their houses.

As the street widened, becoming brighter, the people became well-dressed. Ladies in capes of velvet walked beside gentlemen in greatcoats, top hats a plenty. She felt her heart thump.

“We are almost at Westford House, are we?” she asked, as the coach rattled past a market-place, the square teeming with people, the church showing the time of two o’ clock in the afternoon.

“I reckon so, My Lady,” Jane said calmly.

They rattled on down the street.

Sophia was glued to the window, watching the strange, wonderful and increasingly familiar scene rush past. She felt her stomach knot. She had been here for the last Season and her father had come down later to join them, riding from the landing on the Thames on horseback, returned from voyaging.

“Father,” she whispered under her breath. Jane didn’t react and Sophia fished in her purse, taking out a handkerchief to dab her chin. She didn’t want to cry! Not on the first day of her quest. She sniffed, trying to contain her emotion.

“Westford House, My Lady,” the coachman called.

Sophia looked up, taking a deep breath. They were in Kensington, and the house that rose up before them was one of the sandstone, fashionable ones. She looked at Jane.

“Let’s alight, then.”

“Oh, yes! My Lady! This is so exciting! I declare! London is so diverting.”

Sophia bit back a smile. At least Jane was excited. She herself was feeling frightened. She had a quest to complete, and no way of knowing where to start.

A shop in Piccadilly Road.

“Thank you,” she said, taking the coachman’s hand. He helped her out of the coach, and she went up the stairs where she was greeted by the butler at the door. He assured her all had been made ready for her arrival.

“Thank you,” she said softly. She let him lead her up the stairs to her bedroom. She tiptoed in, breathing in the slightly musty scent of a room that had been shut for months without air. The fire had been lit, and the familiar cream-colored quilt laid on the bed, the window open to the street. It was comfortable and warm, like always.

“Now, My Lady,” Jane said, coming up with Sophia’s traveling-case in hand. “I suppose we should take a late luncheon? I am quite starved!” She put down the case in the corner, poking the fire to fan the flames.

Sophia let out a sigh, “Yes, Jane. We will go down. And then, I would like to go immediately to Piccadilly Road. I wish to visit a bookshop there.”

“Yes, My Lady.”

They ate in the drawing-room and then Sophia insisted on changing her black traveling-gown for a fresher one. She wanted to feel ready for London.

“Very nice, My Lady,” Jane commented, standing back to study her.

Her brown hair was arranged in an elaborate bun and she donned a dark blue dress, matched to a tall bonnet with a slight veil. She walked out to the coach feeling ready to face whatever she might find on her quest.

“Piccadilly Road, please,” she told the driver. He gestured with his

right hand. His other held the reins.

“Yes, My Lady.”

“And return after an hour, if you please.”

“Yes, My Lady.”

They rattled off down the street. Jane was sitting opposite Sophia, but she was focused on the window, too interested in the scene around them to really do much talking. That was perfect for Sophia, who felt far too tense.

“Piccadilly Road, My Lady.”

Sophia took a deep breath. Here they were. Could she do it? She had no idea. She took a deep breath and opened the door of the coach.

“Let’s go,” she said. Her back straightened.

“My Lady…” Jane panted, as they strode down the street. The coach had stopped at one end, but Sophia had no idea it was so vast! The whole of London seemed to be in this street! She wove her way around gentlemen standing outside tailor’s shops and ladies sauntering past coffee-houses and felt her heart thud.

“My Lady…”

“Yes, Jane?” she asked, tensely. “What is it?”

“My Lady, what are we here for? Only, if we’re looking for a tea-house, we just passed it.” She sounded helpful.

“We’re looking for a bookshop.”

Jane didn’t say anything more. Sophia took a deep breath, looking down the street. It was impossibly crowded, and she felt sure that she wasn’t going to find it. A shop on Piccadilly Road! Here there seemed to be nothing but shops! She would have more luck trying to find a rose in a rosegarden. She felt baffled.

“Bookshop,” she muttered under her breath. “Bookshop.”

They walked on and the road changed a little – the fancy shopwindows became replaced with small displays outside bakeries and coffee-houses, and then by nothing at all, only little doors with diamond-paned windows. She took a deep breath.

The road was narrower here, the crowds less. She could still see people, but they walked more swiftly, and she sensed that the road was running out, meeting with another road somewhere up ahead. She looked around the wide, cobbled expanse, feeling lost.

“Have we gone too far?” she asked Jane.

“No, My Lady. This is still Piccadilly Road. Keep looking.”

Jane opened her eyes. It was not so loud here, and that made it easier to concentrate. She looked down the street, trying to spot a bookshop, and her eyes widened.

“There!”

Over a glass window, written in gold-painted lettering on a dark wooden sign, was a sign that said, “Books.”

“Found it!” she said. Jane looked in the direction she was looking in, and beamed.

“There it is! You’re right, My Lady! Let’s go!”

Feeling a giggle rise in her throat, Sophia crossed the street, delight making her heart soar. They had done it! They had completed the first step on the quest! She felt brave, and a sense of pure achievement made her grin, blood racing. This was exciting!

They had found the first place in the wonderful set of clues, all by themselves!

She was still smiling when she walked through the big door.

It was open, which was lucky – it could just have been closed for lunch. The inside smelled musty. She took a deep breath.

"Hello?" she called out. "Is there anyone there?"

She looked around, heart thumping. What if there was nobody there? What would she do? Her father had said there would be someone there! What if this wasn't right after all? Maybe she should just pack in this ridiculous quest, like her mother had said. Her courage was about to desert her now.

"Wait," she whispered, as Jane looked around. She had heard a noise.

Footsteps, on stone.

She looked up, heart thudding, as someone came over from a back room she hadn't noticed. Her eyes focused on the person. They were tall, male, with dark hair and wearing a smart black suit. They had a slim face, well-formed nose, and full lips. They had wide, dark eyes, and they were smiling. They looked familiar.

You!

Sophia almost said it, but manners caught her in time. All the same, she stared. The man standing before her, with his eyes wide and surprise on his long and handsome face, was the man she had met at the house.

Her father's friend.

She took a deep breath, took the letter out of her purse, and began to talk.

Chapter 10

Luke stared in surprise. The young lady who had walked into his bookshop out of a cold and busy London street was none other than the young lady he had met at Charles' home!

"Good day," she said, in that sweet, light voice he had heard in his dreams sometimes, since that moment. "I am here with a somewhat irregular purpose. If you would indulge me, I need to ask you for something. Do you have a letter? It would have come from Lord Westford. My father."

"My Lady!" Luke bowed low; shock suddenly being overwritten by manners. "Um, well. Let me say, I am honoured to meet you. Well, to meet you *again*. I'm Luke Beaumont," he added, holding out a hand.

He went red. What was he doing? She was a lady! He shouldn't be shaking her *hand*. And he should probably have asked her for her name, first. He was messing this up properly! His body was awash with tension and wonderment.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Beaumont," the young lady said with a gentle voice. She seemed unbothered by his unconventional welcome. "I am Lady Sophia. This is my chaperone, Jane Braceley." She gestured at the pretty, if drably dressed woman who had followed her. "We are both delighted to make your acquaintance. Now," she added, handing him a letter, "will you help me in my endeavour?"

Luke blinked, staring at her, his eyes focused on her pale skin, on the delightful brightness of her smile. He coughed, embarrassed again.

“Of course. I mean, yes, My Lady. I am sorry for your loss,” he added as he took the note, suddenly remembering what she was doing here, and his manners, at once. “Lord Westford was a remarkable man. I was deeply saddened to hear of your loss.” He spoke sincerely. He had been truly shocked by Charles’ death.

“Thank you indeed, Sir.”

She was looking away, and he felt a desperate urge to comfort her. He held out a hand.

“Please, My Lady, come and sit. Anything that I can do, I would be very happy to assist with. Now, as it happens, your father did send a note to be kept with me. It arrived rather late, but I still have it here, in the shop, as per his instructions. I had not expected you would come for it in person! Please, sit down.”

He drew out one of the seats before the desk. Lady Sophia sat neatly. Jane took the other one, looking around the bookshop, wide-eyed. Luke focused on Lady Sophia. He liked her name. It suited her. He shook his head.

Luke, get a grip on yourself! He told himself firmly. She was here for the letter.

“I have it here,” he said, opening the top drawer – the one that he reserved for the most important correspondences. He found the letter and slid it out of the drawer, handing it to Lady Sophia. She took it in her small, neat fingers.

“Thank you,” she said. She sat looking at it, and Luke could just imagine how she felt, receiving a letter written by her dearest father, just a few weeks after his passing. He took a deep breath.

“My Lady, you are so brave,” he said. “Your father would be so pleased.”

She looked up. Her eyes filled with tears. He ached to see them. She blinked, dabbing them with a handkerchief.

“Thank you, Sir,” she murmured. “Sorry. This is just all so unprecedented.”

“Yes,” he replied. “Yes, of course. I understand,” he said softly. “Will you take tea? I can send someone across the street.”

Lady Sophia smiled. She was still crying, eyes bright. “No. Thank you – you are very kind,” she sniffed. “You were a good friend to my father.”

She said it as a statement, not a question. Luke was surprised by the intensity of his own reaction. He took a deep breath.

“Thank you, My Lady,” he said softly. “I hope that I was, yes. Your father was a delightful man. And he would have been so proud of you.”

“Thank you,” she whispered again. She swallowed hard. He could see that she was in the grip of strong emotion, though she was trying so hard to conceal it.

Luke looked away, not sure what to do. He wanted to comfort her, but he sensed that she would feel ashamed and would like to cry in private. He just sat and waited while she sniffed and composed herself.

“Thank you for the letter,” she said. “I will open it here. It is…easier to do so in company. And you were his friend.”

“I would be honoured to assist in any way,” Luke said sincerely. He had never meant any words more than he meant those. This beautiful creature had meant a great deal to him from their first meeting. He would do anything to help.

“Thank you,” she said quietly. She slid a slim finger under the tiny flap of the envelope and lifted the seal. Luke tried not to stare, though he could not help watching her face. It was quiet and composed, her eyes the only thing that moved as she read the page.

At the end, he saw her frown. She looked up at him again.

“Sir?” she said. “I am afraid I will need your assistance. I am not sure I understand it.”

Luke nodded, “I would be happy to assist. And I should mention, he left this book, too.”

They both read the letter together.

They sat at a table and together they opened the front page of the book her father had left: a translation of the poems of the Sufi poet, Rumi.

On the front page, written in her father's hand, was the third clue:

"In Britannia's museum, on display, is a most remarkable key to the writing of the past. Donated by the regent's father George the Third, the Rosetta Stone is a thing of rare wonder. I would that you visit it in the company of my friend, the Honourable Luke Beaumont, younger son of the Earl of Averley, who, I am sure, is there with you in this moment. When there, open the letter on page 39 of this book."

They turned their heads and stared at each other excitedly.

"This is a proper quest," Luke said. He was surprised. He had not expected that – a real adventure – and he knew that was wrong of him. Of course Charles would set a proper quest for his daughter.

She looked at him, a friendly expression on her face. He felt a wash of feeling when he saw her smile. "It is! This is so exciting."

"It is," he said softly. He stared at her. He couldn't help it. He had been interested in her the moment he saw her. Now, so close, with her enthusiasm bubbling over for all to see, she was even lovelier than he

remembered. He could not get his eyes off her.

They sat together in the silence.

“The museum…is that far from here?” she said. She looked down at the table shyly.

“Um, not terribly,” Luke said. His mouth felt dry.

“Oh,” she said in a small voice. She was still looking down shyly. Her skin was soft, her lips a shade of soft pink and so kissable that it sent a wash of longing through him.

Luke tried to look away. He felt guilty about his enormous attraction to her, and deeply awkward about it.

“Sir?” Lady Sophia said softly. “I…I know this is very difficult, and most irregular, but, well…it seems that I need to go to the museum. And, well…Father’s note suggests that I should be accompanied, and…”

“Of course,” he said swiftly. He was grateful to Charles – he would have offered, of course, to accompany her, but it would have been harder.

“*You will* come with me?” Her eyes were sparkling. They were very green, he noticed; the colour of the river under rainy skies. His heart melted.

“Of course,” he said again. “It would be an honour. I would dearly love to show it to you.”

He reddened as her eyes widened. What was he saying? He meant every word, but she had only just met him!

“Thank you,” she said.

“Of course.”

Her green eyes held his and he found himself staring into them. They were so wide, and he thought they had little rings of grey around the pupil. He could have stared at them all day.

She was looking back at him, and he felt a surge of heat through his body. His hand was not too far from hers on the table, soft and long-fingered. He blinked, making himself wake up from his reverie.

“So, My Lady,” he said gently, “shall we meet tomorrow? What time would suit you?”

“Ten o’ clock in the morning?” she asked, her pale cheeks flushing prettily. “I…well, I will be certain of being awake by then.”

He looked at her with a friendly expression. He himself was fond of

sleeping late, and did so whenever the bookshop was closed. He recalled he could ask Mr. Amberley across the road to come in and mind the shop for an hour or two – he owed him a favour. He tried to get the image of her sleeping out of his mind. She would look so lovely, those big green eyes closed, her hair resting on her pale face.

"Well, then, ten o' clock it is," he said, clearing his throat. "I shall report to Westford Heights at ten o' clock tomorrow morning."

She gave him an overwhelmed look. "You know where it is! Of course you do," she added, colouring. "Father…"

"Yes," he said, feeling sad for reminding her of her sorrow. "I did take the coach there with him. I will come tomorrow and we can take a hired coach to the museum. I believe it is fairly far from there."

"Oh!" Lady Sophia clapped her hands together excitedly. "Sorry," she added, flushing. "But this is exciting. I suppose that is wrong of me, considering…" She flushed and looked down.

"No," he said gently. "Of course not. Your father would not wish you to be sad. I know it."

Lady Sophia looked up, her lovely green eyes damp at the edges. "Oh, thank you," she said softly.

"Of course," he said.

They looked at each other. Again, he felt that overwhelming urge to kiss her. He looked away hastily. He needed to control that urge, or he would scare her away.

"So," he said, pushing back his chair and standing up swiftly. "I suppose I should let you go back to the Heights – it is a fair distance away. You didn't *walk*, did you?" he asked, frowning.

"We took the coach," Lady Sophia said quickly. She glanced at Mrs. Braceley, the two of them suddenly recalling that she was there.

"Oh. Good," Luke said, swallowing a lump in his throat. He felt awkward – he was sure Mrs. Braceley had noticed his odd behavior, and he didn't want her to think that he was a danger to Lady Sophia. He bowed. "My Lady, I wish you a safe return to your lodgings. Might I walk you to your coachstop?"

Lady Sophia looked up, a mix of delight and nervousness showing on her face. "Well…that is very thoughtful, Sir," she said slowly. "But it might be better if Jane and I walked back together. After all, this is London, and you know what people are like." She went red.

"Yes, of course." He nodded. He knew she meant that people would speak about her being seen with a strange man. He instantly went red. "Well, then. I wish you a safe journey home. And I look forward to calling on you at ten of the clock next morning."

"I will see you then, yes, Sir," she nodded. She curtseyed and Mrs. Braceley, to his surprise, smiled at him, and then the two were on the way to the door and he felt his heart lift as Lady Sophia waved to him before going out through the door into the street.

“Well, then,” he said to himself. With her not there, the shop seemed oddly silent. He looked around, the shelves of books seeming dustier and more neglected. The air smelled stale. The little rope by the door that set off the bell was still swinging, as it had done since she shut it. He went over and touched it, stopping its motion.

“Well, you ought to get back to work,” he said to himself firmly. Here he was, with receipts to check and bookshelves to load, and it was only four o’ clock in the afternoon. He really ought to get some work done! But as he went back to his desk, he realized how dazed he felt. It reminded him of a time in Cambridge, where someone had accidentally hit him on the head with a racquet. He had felt confused and dizzy for a few hours. He felt like that now.

He drew back the chair behind the desk, planning to sit down and get on with work. But all he could think of was Lady Sophia’s sweet face, watching him. He kept on seeing those green eyes in his mind again and again.

“Stop it,” he told himself firmly. He leaned back and drew the book of receipts towards him and tried to focus. By the time it was five o’ clock and time to go home he felt dazed and drained. He stood and reached for his coat, knowing that all the rest of the evening he would be thinking of little except for her.

Chapter 11

Sophia walked up the stairs to the front door at the townhouse. She felt as if she floated up. She was dazed and distracted. She looked around but her thoughts were full of the man at the bookshop, and her mind didn't really see anything except his face.

"Shall I set out some tea in the drawing-room?" Jane asked her as they reached the upper floor. Sophia blinked.

"Um, yes, Jane. Thank you. I would like that," Sophia managed to say. She could barely recall the time. Was it really teatime already? She walked up to her bedroom, not seeing where she was going, and took off her cloak and hung it on the hook by the door dreamily. She sat down at the table.

"He is so handsome," she whispered to her reflection. She went pink. She smiled at herself, wondering what he had seen when he looked at her. She knew what she had seen…he was tall, handsome and dark-haired, with a thin-lipped mouth and the most beautiful dark eyes she'd ever clapped eyes on. What had he seen when he looked at her?

"Lady Sophia," she told herself firmly, "that is not a subject suitable for you." She couldn't help chuckling. She felt happy. She leaned back and shut her eyes a moment.

She remembered how it had felt to look up and see him; her delight when she made his acquaintance. Of course, she had met him before. She was sure it was him. But she hadn't known his name then. She felt a flicker of delight rise up in her as she recalled their meeting in the bookshop, and how delighted he had seemed to recognize her as well.

She was in mourning, however, and part of her told her that it was entirely wrong to be feeling the way she did. But her father *had* sent her to the bookshop. It had been his idea for her to meet Mr. Beaumont, after all.

"Father, I wish I knew what you wanted," she said softly. "Why did you send me there in the first place?"

She stood and rang the bell for Jessie, telling herself that she was being foolish. She would know more tomorrow, after all. Then they would find out the next clue in the series.

"My Lady?" Jessie said, coming in. She must have been outside in the hallway and heard the bell from there. Sophia felt reassured to see her. She'd come down from Westford House on another coach, along with Sophia's luggage. It was good to have someone she knew well with her here – the house seemed so big and cold and unwelcoming.

"Jessie! I am so glad to have you with me. Could you fetch a day-dress, please? And take out these hairpins – they are giving me a sore head." She touched her forehead.

"Of course, Lady Sophia," Jessie said, as Sophia sat down at the dressing-table. "Did you have a nice afternoon?"

"I did," Sophia said, keeping her face neutral. She didn't want Jessie to suspect what she'd been up to. She blushed. She hadn't been up to anything! She had gone to visit a bookshop, in accordance with the instructions of her father. Any feelings she had during the course of

that were entirely her own business.

"Well, that's good. London's so big! I'd forgotten. I already miss the house at Westford."

"I know," Sophia said gently. "But we won't be here long."

She shuddered at the thought. Part of her – though she did find London scary – was actually more at home here in the silent townhouse than in the country manor. She wanted to believe it was because of the memories of her father that were inescapable, but she knew it was more than that. Here, there was nobody to criticize her.

She pushed the thought away. It was disloyal.

"Now, then," she said as Jessie arranged her hair in a simple bun, "I'll take tea and then spend the rest of the afternoon reading."

"Very good, My Lady."

She took tea and went upstairs, but it was hard to focus on stories. She kept on thinking of Mr. Beaumont. His handsome face and his brown eyes floated in front of her and she found herself thinking about him when she was trying to concentrate on parts of the story.

"I'll retire to bed," she told herself after dinner. She'd asked Jessie to bring her a tray – she was tired and felt better keeping to herself. She was sure Jane would rather take her meals by herself too – at least for

today, when they were both exhausted from the journey.

“Goodnight, My Lady,” Jessie said, after helping her into bed. “Sleep well.”

“Goodnight, Jessie. You too,” Sophia said as her maid retired for the evening, shutting the door behind her.

She was in bed, but she couldn’t sleep. Every time she closed her eyes, images of Luke Beaumont floated into her thoughts. She recalled his handsome smile, his dark eyes. The memories filled her with joy. He had a particular mannerism – his mouth lifted up at one corner when he was thinking. She thought it was easily the loveliest thing she had ever seen. She found herself thinking of him and wondering what he would say tomorrow.

The next morning she jumped out of bed, the sunshine streaming in through the windows, her heart thudding in her chest.

“What time is it?”

She ran to the mantelpiece above the fireplace in the bedroom and looked at the time. It was just half an hour past eight. That gave her plenty of time.

“We’re only meeting at ten,” she told herself firmly, though her heart was racing with nerves and excitement. “Jessie?”

She waited for her maid to arrive, opening her wardrobe and going through the contents carefully. She wanted the right dress. Of course, all the dresses she had with her were in dark colours – black, brown and navy, as suited a person in mourning. She drew out a brown dress, and a blue one in a colour so dark it was almost black.

"Jessie!" she greeted her maid with relief. "The brown or the blue?"

"Um…the navy one does bring out the colour of your eyes, My Lady," Jessie said after a moment. "And I can add a ribbon to your hair – we have one in a nice deep blue that you bought in the village."

"That's right." She nodded. She waited impatiently while Jessie did up the buttons – it seemed to be taking ages!

"Are you sure about that bit there?" she asked Jessie quizzically as she styled her hair. "I like it when it frames my face more."

"Oh! Well, we'll just draw this part back, then," Jessie said, adjusting a pin here and a curl there until Sophia's face was framed in dark hair, ringlets just touching her shoulders.

"There we are, My Lady. Will you take breakfast here, or in the breakfast-room?"

"Wherever is faster!" Sophia giggled. "I have an appointment at ten o' clock this morning and I don't want to be late!"

As Jessie took the tray downstairs again, the butler appeared. “Lady Sophia…there is a visitor at the door. Should I ask him to come up to the drawing-room?”

“I’m coming!” Sophia said, jumping up instantly. Her heart thumped and she hastily checked her appearance in the mirror. Did she look right? Had her hair come loose while she ate? She raced downstairs.

Mr. Beaumont was standing in the hallway. As she ran downstairs, she spotted him. Tall, dressed in a dark suit with a black tophat, he bowed low when he saw her.

“Good morning,” he said. “I am delighted to see you so bright and early,My Lady.”

His eyes sparkled and she smiled back. She felt as if warmth was spreading through her chest, heating and constricting her body. She cleared her throat carefully.

“And I thank you for coming, so bright and early,” she managed to say. She dropped a little curtsey, feeling breathless.

“Well, then,” he said, grinning back, “I would be delighted to escort you to the museum. If you are ready to go?”

“Yes.” Sophia nodded quickly. “I must put on my cloak and bonnet, and fetch my chaperone. She will accompany us.” She turned to the stairs, heart thumping.

“Yes. I’ll wait,” he said easily.

She hurried up the stairs. Jane was sitting in the breakfast-room, working on her embroidery. She looked up as Sophia rushed in.

“Jane! He’s here! Come on…let’s go down.” Her voice was breathless with excitement.

Jane nodded and walked calmly to the door. Sophia tried to calm herself, but her heart was jumping and her mind seemed to be packed with thoughts. They needed to find a coach! She needed her cloak. Where was her handbag, with the book?

“Here,” she said to herself, grabbing her purse and cloak as she passed the rack. She looked up to find Mr. Beaumont smiling at her.

“This is an adventure,” he replied. “Shall we go and wave down a coach?”

“Yes,” Sophia said. She felt her heart lift. This was exciting!

They walked out into the street. Mr. Beaumont lifted a long arm and waved to the passing carriages.

“Ahoy!” he called out to a particularly battered coach, painted with black varnish that had begun to crack along the side. “Coachman! Passage for three to the Museum?”

“Yes, guvnor,” the coachman called, grinning cheekily at them all. He stated his fare and Mr. Beaumont immediately dug in his pocket, handing the coins up.

“Thank you,” Sophia murmured as he helped her into the coach. His fingers touched hers and made them tingle. She swallowed hard, heart thudding, and sat down carefully. Jane sat beside her. Mr. Beaumont got in last, sitting down opposite. She threw a fond look at him.

“This is most diverting,” he said, smiling at her with genuine enjoyment.

Sophia nodded, trying to contain her excitement. “Yes, it is.”

They all sat quietly during the coach-drive. Jane was glued to the window, observing all the passing scenery with interest. Sophia looked out of the window too, as they rattled down shopping-streets and past marketplaces, alongside theatres and halls and mansions. She held her breath. Occasionally, she glanced up at Mr. Beaumont. He seemed likewise absorbed in the scenery.

“Oh!” Sophia blinked, surprised. “Is this it?”

“Yes,” Mr. Beaumont said warmly. “I rather think it is. Shall we get out?”

Sophia nodded wordlessly. She found that she felt a little nervous. She

took his hand as he stepped down and looked up. There, before her, was the tall and imposing building of the British Museum.

"Oh!" Jane breathed, looking up. Sophia nodded. She felt just as in awe of it as Jane did. They both stood at the foot of the stairs, staring at the dark entrance ahead.

"Shall we go in?" Mr. Beaumont asked. "I think I recall the exhibit your father mentions."

"Yes," Sophia said after a long moment. "Let's go in."

He stood back and let her go first. Sophia was surprised by how nervous she felt as she did so. She walked up ahead of him and was relieved to hear him clear his throat and address the man at the door.

"Three passes for the morning, if you please."

"Yes, Sir."

Sophia breathed in the scent of the hallway, which was imposing and cold after the bright light of the streets. She drew her cloak about her, reluctant to take it off. The air smelled dusty and she looked up as Mr. Beaumont stepped through the door behind her.

"So," he said, smiling, "shall we go? I believe it is upstairs."

“Yes, of course.” She nodded. She followed him. Jane lagged behind and Sophia was surprised by how nervous she felt. She had no idea what to expect. The book was in her purse, hanging from her wrist. She found herself trying to guess what her father might have wanted her to see.

“Here we are,” Mr. Beaumont said, his voice resonating strangely in the high, empty space. “I think it is this way.”

“Yes,” Sophia murmured, following him. Her footsteps clicked on the parquet flooring. She breathed in the dusty, silent air.

“Here we are,” he said.

They all stood together before a glass case. Sophia peered in. Jane stood beside her, also looking down. They were all looking at a stone of black granite. It was perhaps the size of a big packing-case, Sophia thought, and on it, in remarkable lettering, were carved three inscriptions.

“Isn’t it beautiful?” Sophia murmured. The writing was exquisite. Eloquent symbols, each carved into the rock with loving care, the curves and shapes as fine as if they were drawn on the surface by hand.

“It is,” Mr. Beaumont said softly.

They all stood looking at it in silence. Sophia could feel the weight of her handbag.

“Should we open the book?”

“Of course.” He nodded.

After a moment of hesitance, she did so. There, on the page, was her father’s neat, precise writing. He had written a message that she read.

“Getting closer to the treasure now. There are three different writings on this stone, all with very different characters, but they all say the same thing. Understanding one of them is understanding all the others. However, there are many ways of interpreting the meaning of what is said. If you remember the questions of the second clue, and combine it with the knowledge of many things meaning one thing and one thing meaning many things, you will understand the next place on your path. Your next clue lies ahead.”

They looked at each other, then back at the amazing stone on display. “There are many ways of saying the same thing,” he said slowly, “and many ways of interpreting what you hear.”

“Exactly!” Sophia said, excitedly. “Things can look the same but can be quite different! The second clue said that rules could be for you or against you, so how does that combine with this?”

Luke paused and thought carefully. “So even though they say one thing they can look very different to different people. What is an important rule that you always follow, Sophia?”

Sophia thought for a moment. It didn't take her long. The first thing to come to her mind was obvious. "Duty," she said. "I always do my duty. My societal class demands that I do certain things, and doing them is so important! Imagine if society cast one out!"

"Yes," Mr. Beaumont said. His face was closed, unreadable. Sophia blushed. She hadn't realized, when she'd began that outburst, what she was going to say. She held those views so deeply that she hadn't even known she held them. She felt embarrassed, and had no idea how to explain what she'd just said.

"Sorry," she said quickly. She felt sick. "I…I wasn't thinking. Shall we go now, please?"

"Of course."

Mr. Beaumont seemed to be distant somehow, and Sophia felt instantly guilty. Something had clearly upset him. She took a deep breath.

"My Lord…forgive me if I said something that offended you. I didn't mean it."

"Not at all," he said softly. Sophia risked a glance, but his face was unreadable. She took a breath.

"Mr. Beaumont, I hope I didn't offend you. Shall we leave now?"

“Yes,” he said. “I shall go and hail the coach for us, to go back to your residence.”

Sophia felt sad. She looked at Jane, but her chaperone was staring into another glass case with an expression of complete absorption. Sophia looked away, wishing that she could let go of this awful feeling in her heart.

“Coach, for three!” Mr. Beaumont called, striding down the stairs into the road.

Sophia followed him, walking a little behind. She watched him, wishing that she could somehow take back the words. He hailed a coach and helped her in. She sat down, looking around the dark interior wordlessly. What could she say to explain her words?

The coach rolled on down the street. Sophia felt relief as the landmarks became ones she recognized. She would be pleased to get out of this coach and back to Westford Heights. She looked up at Mr. Beaumont but he was looking out of the window, thoughts elsewhere.

“Westford Heights!” the coach-driver called down. Sophia swallowed hard.

Mr. Beaumont nodded and alighted from the coach. Sophia tried to think of something to say.

“Thank you,” she said. “I am glad we are following this quest.”

“Thank you, Lady Sophia,” he said formally. Sophia looked up, but his eyes were utterly expressionless. She looked at Jane, who had also alighted and was walking hastily towards the stairs. She seemed to sense the discomfort in the coach, because she looked distinctly awkward. “I trust we will find the next clue,” he said, as she walked away.

Sophia felt her heart lift. At least he was still interested in helping her! She felt her lips lift in a smile but he was already walking away, back down the street the way he’d come.

“Come, let’s go in,” she said to Jane, who nodded, clutching her shawl around her.

“Yes, My Lady. Let’s go in and get a nice pot of tea and a slice of something sweet. It’s been a long morning.”

Sophia nodded sadly. She had enjoyed it, but something she’d said had upset Mr. Beaumont deeply. And she knew what it was, too – she had referenced class and duty. She knew those things must hurt him, even if not exactly how, and she was looking forward to a chance to set it right.

Chapter 12

Luke walked to the door of the bookshop and reached for his hat. It was midday, and he'd been sitting there for hours and had managed to do very little. He kept on thinking of Sophia's words.

Imagine if society cast you out!

Her horror in those words had been clear. She clearly thought that was the most terrible thing. He pushed the thought away, reaching for his cloak and throwing it around his shoulders.

"Damn that," he muttered under his breath. "If she wants to think ill of me for that, she can think it."

Her judgement – so scalding, so obvious – had stung him badly.

He *had* been cast out, and he'd done well despite that. A prosperous bookshop, a name and – what was most important to him – the right to be seen with whom he wished, wear what he wished and dine where he wished. Those things seemed worth it to him. Or they *had*, until a young lady made him feel like being accepted by society was the only important thing.

"Luke, stop it," he told himself firmly. "You did what you felt best."

He jammed his hat on low – the day had turned rainy during the

morning – and got ready to go out. He was in low spirits and he could not seem to shake them.

"Luke!" Gilbert almost shouted from the doorstep. "Good morning! Ready for lunch?" His friend was flushed and grinning. He stepped in through the now-open door, shutting it behind him. Luke made a face.

"Dash it, Gilbert…do you have to give me a fit of apoplexy?" His heart was pounding, sweat forming on his brow. He'd been downcast and sorrowful and then had the wits frightened out of him, all in the space of a few seconds! He leaned on the wall, breath heaving. What a fright he'd had!

"Sorry, Luke," Gilbert said apologetically, turning to him with a grin. "I had no idea you were in the doorway. Are you all right?" he added, reaching out with his right hand, resting it on Luke's arm.

"I'm fine," Luke mumbled. He turned away, looking back into the shop.

"Good," Gilbert said, giving him a shove in the arm, playfully. "Now then, shall we go? I thought we could go to the coffee-house for lunch. Our table by the window will be open, I'm sure of it."

"Yes," Luke said, straightening up. He wiped the sweat off his brow and tucked his handkerchief into his pocket. He was feeling a little better now. With a bit of luck, he might be able to discuss matters with Gilbert – he was sure to have a clear view.

"So," Gilbert said, folding his considerable tallness into the corner and

sitting down at the table. “How is business, these days?”

“Oh, *fine*,” Luke said as casually as he could, passing the Gazette from the table back to the proprietor and feeling just a little uncomfortable. “Why would you ask?”

The premises were dark, with a few lamps on the wall providing low light, and they could barely see across the shop this afternoon. The table was sticky, Luke noticed, shifting uncomfortably. He was used to this particular coffee-house, though, and the coffee was good in spite of the less than salubrious surroundings.

“Oh, well, I just reckoned you looked a little disturbed,” Gilbert said, waving to attract the attention of the proprietor again.

“Not disturbed,” Luke countered, though he was not surprised he’d noticed.

“Grand! Coffee, please…and a ham sandwich. Make that three, actually – I’m starved today! Luke?”

“The same,” Luke agreed. His stomach was rumbling painfully, and he reckoned he needed something to make him stay awake. The proprietor noted down their orders and went back to the counter. Luke leaned back, his eyes shut.

“So,” Gilbert said, stretching out his long legs under the table and facing Luke contemplatively. “What else happened this morning?”

“Nothing,” Luke said defensively. Why was Gilbert insisting on prying like this? Did he look so bad that his friend felt the need to know what upset him?

“Grand,” Gilbert said, leaning back and reaching for another newspaper on an unoccupied table. “Well, my morning was also rather uneventful. A meeting with my tailor and a chat with my publisher, and then a stroll down to the park, where I sat about on a bench and watched young ladies. What did you do?” he asked, opening the paper.

“Nothing,” Luke insisted. The proprietor put down coffee on the table and Luke breathed in the smell, feeling himself start to relax a little. He reached for the cup and sipped it thoughtfully. “Well, I went to the museum, actually.”

“The museum! Good.” Gilbert nodded. “Haven’t been in ages. Got something new? Some other exciting exhibit to stare at?”

“No,” Luke said, feeling his lips lift in a smile. “Nothing besides the usual. I didn’t really pay much attention, though.”

“Why was that?” Gilbert said. He had to raise his voice – the place was starting to fill with people, and the level of noise had increased substantially. Two fellows in the corner – students – had started a political argument and some of the others in the coffee-house had joined in. A poet was busy trying to compose aloud, and a merchant was grumbling about the price of wool. It was the usual crowd, the usual chaos.

“Because I went accompanied!” Luke shouted back, raising his voice

above the din.

“Oh? By whom?” Gilbert bellowed.

“Somebody you don’t know,” Luke shouted. Abruptly, the noise died down. He found himself speaking into a lull of quiet and went red. “Sorry. I went with the daughter of an old friend, who passed recently.”

“I’m so sorry,” Gilbert said, concerned. “And the daughter…how is she?”

“She’s all right,” Luke said softly. “I mean…she seems to be managing. Or I thought so, anyhow.” He pushed away the confused, sorrowful expression on her face. He had upset her. He realized that now.

Luke, how could you? Her grief is recent, and you made her feel worse.

“Well, then,” Gilbert said, reaching for the pot and pouring himself more coffee. “What’s there to look so miserable about?”

Luke stared at him. “Miserable,” he said crossly. “I don’t look like that! I’m fine, Gilbert. Really, I am. Just drink your coffee. I need to get back soon.” He looked away, annoyed. Couldn’t he just leave him be?

“Fine,” Gilbert said. He finished pouring a cup and put the pot back on the table, crossly.

Luke shut his eyes. He hadn't meant to upset his friend. He was making a mess today, wasn't he? He opened his eyes, poured himself some more coffee, and tried to compose his thoughts.

"Gilbert, I'm sorry…" he said after a moment. "I was upset. I just… well, I feel stupid, if I am honest. I shouldn't let a young lady so clearly in distress ruffle me." He looked away, embarrassed.

Gilbert shook his head. "Luke, young ladies are something else."

Luke chuckled. He knew that Gilbert – in spite of his title and his poetic work – did not have much luck with the ladies, and hearing his friend's opinion, he felt better. He also felt ready to ask Gilbert for some advice.

"Gilbert…I upset her. I mean, she upset me. Let me explain," he added, when Gilbert was frowning at him across the table. "I was talking to her at one of the artifacts," he said, not mentioning the quest, since Gilbert would definitely think that all of them were crazy. "And, well, somehow the topic of duty came up. And, well…it made me recall bad things."

"Mm." Gilbert nodded. He was sitting and listening, and Luke already felt better. "I understand."

"Well, I know it's foolish," Luke said, looking back down at the table, where the newspaper lay folded and sticking in the damp patch of old stains. "But, well…for so many years I thought I'd stopped thinking like that; thought I'd stopped blaming myself for turning my back on

the family, for walking away from my background. But she made me reconsider it all."

"And she is noble?"

"How'd you guess?" Luke asked, reaching for his coffee. It was scalding and dark, and he tossed it back without noticing the heat or the taste.

"Well, you probably wouldn't have been discussing something like that, were she not," Gilbert said softly. "And?"

"And what?" Luke asked, feeling defensive again. He'd already let Gilbert know more than he would ever tell anyone. He felt vulnerable already.

"And, well…clearly this young lady is something special?"

"Gilbert, I won't mention anything more," Luke said, flushing red. It was bad enough that he felt like Lady Sophia had kicked him in an old wound. He didn't need Gilbert making him feel a fool for his interest in her. He knew already that it would come to nothing – if societal position meant so much to her, how could it? He pushed back his chair.

"All right, Luke," Gilbert sighed. "I promise, I'll stop it. I don't want to upset you."

“Me neither,” Luke said sincerely.

He finished his coffee, and Gilbert drank another cup too. They leaned back and listened to the conversations around them. Somewhere, somebody was discussing tax in a loud voice. The merchant who had been complaining about the wool had been joined by another merchant, and they were talking animatedly about the silk trade. The political discussion had quietened down, and been replaced by a whole group of poets, who all seemed to be contributing to one particular poem.

Luke felt calmer. Somehow, the usual sounds of chaos around them were reassuring. The coffee-house always sounded like that. He breathed in the scent of coffee and the smell of tobacco, drifting through the windows, and felt peaceful.

“So,” Gilbert said after they’d sat in silence for a few minutes. “Shall we go? I have an appointment this afternoon. Need to talk to my accountant. Not fun.”

“Want me to come?” Luke asked. He couldn’t really ask his shopkeeper-friend to oversee the bookshop for a full two hours, but he’d be willing to accompany a friend.

“Thank you, Luke,” Gilbert said softly. “But no. I’ll be fine. I hope you are?”

“I’m fine. Thanks, Gilbert,” Luke said.

They walked back part of the way together. Luke was quiet. He kept

on turning the conversation over in his mind, along with Lady Sophia's words.

What would one do, if one was cast out of society?

He went into the back room – a tiny space stacked full of new copies of books from the publishing warehouse – and started unpacking. The question haunted him.

"Damn it," he said under his breath as he pushed a load of books out through the door, straining and grunting with the effort. "I *know what one does*. One opens a bookshop and tries to flog literary works to the wealthy and well-read of London."

He sat down behind the desk, sweating. He laughed, half amused.

It was years since he'd felt the need to justify himself. He had opened the shop six years ago upon his leaving Cambridge, and he'd had to argue fiercely with his father for the right to open it. He had thought all of this was past him…the arguing and the need to justify all of it. He'd made his choice. He remembered how hard it had been, how he'd been afraid to do it and dreaded it, but he'd done it and been glad for it.

Now, sitting in the bookshop with the door shut and the room illuminated by a few badly-trimmed lamps, he found himself questioning it all over again.

"I wanted to step away from all that," he told himself firmly. "The need to explain. The need to justify. The need to meet standards."

He remembered the first night he went to the Tatfield with Gilbert. He had been elated! Throughout his life, he'd become accustomed to acting as if people were always looking, always full of censure. But that night, he'd chosen to believe no-one was watching. And it had felt terrific.

He rested his head in his hands. He did believe in what he'd done. He had to. He wasn't going to allow himself to enter that place of questioning and wondering and fearing he was wrong.

He had to believe in his bookshop, and in walking away from society, even if it meant that someone like Lady Sophia was forever out of his reach.

He had to believe in himself.

Chapter 13

Sophia looked in the mirror of the dressing-table. The late afternoon sunshine leaked in through the window, painting the silent room in oranges and yellows. She felt sad. She tried to recall her exact words to Luke, and found that she couldn't remember them.

But I know what they meant.

She looked away, ashamed. She had told him that it would be terrible to lose one's place in society. It had come unbidden to her mind, an automatic response out of years of being told exactly that thing.

"But *he is* outcast from society!" she told herself crossly.

That was why he had been so unhappy! She had reminded him of his situation, made him feel bad about it. She wished she hadn't said it.

"But, do I believe it?"

She had never had to question it. Mama told her every day – or almost every day – how terrible it would be, to lose one's position and station in the social classes. She had been raised knowing that it was her goal in life to maintain her position. And that of her family, too, of course.

"But what would really happen?" she asked herself, looking around the room.

Luke was the son of an earl – he had introduced himself as such – and yet he ran a bookshop in London, and nobody referred to his rank. He had clearly turned his back on everything that went with the station of his birth. And yet, he was still alive! Not only that, but he seemed happy, too – or at least he had been, before she raised a topic that was clearly hurtful to him.

"I didn't raise it," she said indignantly. "He did. It was he who asked me what rules I obey."

She leaned back, feeling confused. That had been the question her father had posed.

Not all rules are good rules.

Rules, duty, interpreting…all the ideas that his clue had raised twined together in her mind, complex and thought-provoking.

"Father, I wish you could have spoken plainly," Sophia said aloud, feeling cross. "I would appreciate it if you'd just write it in plain words. If you don't approve of duty, why didn't you just say so?"

The room was silent. She felt a tear run down her cheek. Father! Why wasn't he here still, alive, now? She felt that familiar anger return to her heart. He had gone and left her, and he expected her to figure this all out by herself. A plague on his silly clues!

She sobbed. She knew she wasn't angry, not really. She just wished he was here.

"They weren't silly," she told the silence. "Just…I wish I understood."

She shut her eyes and wiped her face and tried to concentrate. Not all rules are good rules. Say that the rule he meant was duty…was it good?

Well, she sniffed, it had certainly upset Luke! He had gone from playful and cheerful to silent and unhappy in seconds.

That meant he definitely felt strongly.

"Maybe I should ask Luke all this?" she asked herself aloud. The idea settled in the silence and it seemed like a good one – she felt better, just thinking it.

"I know what I'll do," she said to herself. "I'll go to the bookshop again and ask him. Besides, I need his help. We need to find the other clue."

She sniffed, feeling better. She did have a quest to complete, and she was going to take it that all of her confusion and doubt were part of the task her father had set. After all, if the question her father posed was supposed to make her think, well – confusion and doubt were part of new ideas, were they not? And she wanted some new ideas.

She pulled the bell-rope, summoning Jessie.

“Can you take my hair down, please?” she said, gesturing at the elaborate style she’d worn all day. “I rather think it’s giving me a headache. And is Jane about?”

“Oh, of course, My Lady.” Jessie nodded. “And yes, Jane is here. It’s five o’ clock…she’ll be here for tea.”

She didn’t comment on Sophia’s face, if she noticed the red nose and damp eyes. She took down the bun and styled her hair in a braided roll, something much less complex and more comfortable.

“Jane?” Sophia greeted as she went downstairs. “Have you rung for tea?”

“Yes, My Lady,” Jane nodded. “Let’s send Mr. Holster down for another cup.”

She was sitting in the drawing-room, facing the bright sunlight, her sewing on her lap. She was working white stitches into the cream collar of a gown. She looked up calmly.

“Thank you,” Sophia said. She settled down at the big table, where a teapot and cup had already been laid out.

“Another cup, please,” Jane said, as the butler came in with the trolley. “Lady Sophia is here.”

“Yes, of course,” he said with a sniff. Sophia wondered how he felt about having to take orders from Jane, who was not of much of a different class to himself. She put the thought aside. Any more thoughts like that today and her poor brain might expire like a parchment in flames.

“That was quite an outing, My Lady,” Jane said candidly as she came over to join Sophia at the table. Sophia looked up from where she was pouring tea for both of them.

“It was?” she asked quizzically. Jane hadn’t really said much about it since they returned from town. She hadn’t realized Jane had enjoyed herself.

Jane grinned, a smile stretching her oval face. “Of course! My Lady! I have never seen you blossom so! He’s a fine sort.”

“Jane!” Sophia went red, delight mingled with shame. “You’re supposed to be the sensible one,” she teased, feeling her cheeks flush darker as Jane laughed.

“My Lady, he is,” she said insistently. “Very fine. I know I oughtn’t to say things like that, but I have a pair of eyes and I can see how fine he is. And you had a nice morning out, didn’t you?”

Sophia looked at the parquet floor, feeling sad. “A little,” she admitted. “Jane…wasn’t he a little strange? I mean, as we came back?”

“Oh, he was quiet.” Jane nodded, sipping her tea and then adding some milk to it, stirring furiously. “I reckon he just had a lot to think about. You were discussing something, yes?”

“Yes,” Sophia said. She was glad Jane hadn’t overheard her outburst. She still wondered why she had said it. She took a sip of her tea.

“Well, I reckon he just had a lot to think about. And that’s no bad thing. People are supposed to make you think. Will we go to see him tomorrow?”

“Jane!” Sophia burst out. This was her chaperone! “We can’t, can we?”

“Thought that was the plan,” Jane said calmly, not taking any notice of her tone now. “I thought you two had a reason to meet again soon?” She looked at her, blue eyes restful.

Sophia looked at her. “We do,” she replied slowly. She hadn’t been aware Jane had been listening to anything that morning. “But, well…I suppose when he behaved so oddly, I guessed that he would like me to not disturb him further.” She sounded hurt.

Jane shot her a look. “You disturbed him, all right,” she agreed. “But I reckon he’d be happy with more of the same disturbance. We’ll go tomorrow.”

“Jane!” Sophia found herself laughing. “I would never have thought

you'd be the one making me go and meet people! But, well…I must admit I would like to see him." Her tummy was tingling, and she couldn't help smiling.

"Well, then," Jane said firmly. "We can ask the coachman to take us to Piccadilly tomorrow. I certainly wouldn't mind. There was a fine tea-shop there, and I would suggest we stop by it for a nice custard pie."

"If you insist," Sophia said giggling. Her dark thoughts had evaporated, and she found herself smiling. She would never have imagined Jane would support her meeting Mr. Beaumont! Of all things, she could not have thought of anything that would surprise her more.

She looked at her again, seeing her in a new light. She'd never been what Sophia had imagined a chaperone would be like – staid, unkind, restrictive. She was not too much older than Sophia, with a sweet face and merry laugh. But only now was Sophia becoming aware of her insightful side.

They ate some sweet jam-tart and drank tea. The meeting tomorrow, they decided, would be at the same time as today.

"And don't forget to bring some sewing," Jane said as she left, while the butler came to fetch the used tea things. "We'll use the time in the coach for embroidery."

"Yes, Jane." Sophia looked at her warmly. She hurried up to her room.

She was looking forward to tomorrow.

As she slipped into bed, she was surprised to find her thoughts wondering again to Luke Beaumont and hoping he was feeling better.

She was looking forward to their trip to the shopping street tomorrow.

Chapter 14

Luke walked into the bookshop. He had slept well that night, and he had woken with a fresh view of things. He had chosen to make his bookshop, all those years ago, and he was glad of his choice.

“Imagine being stuck with my brother’s life.”

He couldn’t help a small smile to himself as he tidied up the display-table, settling books back into place. His brother was forever heading to court, where he was an official of some sort. Luke, on the other hand, could sit in his bookshop and read all day, if he wished. Or he could go out to the coffee-house for an hour for lunch, come back and talk to Gilbert for most of the afternoon in the bookshop, while customers came and left. He enjoyed it.

“Back home it was all rules and awkward silence.” He shook his head. He had forgotten that. His father had raised Luke and his brother to show no emotions, to be cold and remote as himself. They had also been taught to do as they were told every time, and to uphold the family honour.

He felt his lip lift in a sorrowful smile, recalling his own childhood at Averley House and on the estate in the countryside. It had been difficult, and he had grown up with very little love. But he was supposed to serve that family above all things? It was a strange system. A world where his own aspirations mattered to nobody – that was what his childhood world had been like. How was he supposed to admire, serve and respect that?

“Dash it!” he said aloud.

That was the same way she'd been brought up! He had been a fool. He should have understood her discomfort entirely.

"Poor Lady Sophia," he said to himself. Unlikely as it seemed, he was sure that her childhood must have closely resembled his own – cold and distant and full of rules. Charles was never at home – it stood to reason his influence would hold little sway.

Luke wished he could speak to her and explain himself. He really did understand, now, why she was struggling with the idea of duty so much.

He had, too.

"Damn it, Lady Sophia," he said aloud to the empty bookshop. "I wish I could talk to you."

He considered taking a coach to Westford Heights, but he reckoned it might be rude. He wished she'd left something like the book behind – maybe he could take it to her?

"I *could* take a book!" he decided spontaneously. "A present! I could say sorry."

He ran to the shelf at the back, where he kept the French novels. Most of the young ladies who came to the shop bought them. He gave up after a moment or two…nothing there sounded as if it would appeal

to Sophia. He was busy riffling through the stacks he'd unpacked yesterday, when the door of the shop opened.

"Oh!" he went red. Lady Sophia was standing in the doorway. He felt as if his heart was melting, spreading sweetness through his body. She was there, dressed in a blue dress and navy-coloured cloak, her face slightly flushed from the cooler air outside. "My Lady! How lovely to see you!" He bowed low. He had dust on his trousers, he noticed, from kneeling behind the desk, but he didn't care particularly.

"Mr. Beaumont," she greeted, dropping a low curtsey. "I must say it is a delight to see you, too." Her already-red cheeks reddened considerably.

He felt his own face blush. "My Lady…to what do I owe this visit?" he asked quickly.

Lady Sophia looked pleased. "I was passing by the bookshop, and I thought I would drop in."

"How nice!" Luke said warmly. He noticed that Mrs. Braceley had gone to the window and was staring out into the street, watching a man wheeling a barrow of fish. He seized his opportunity to be truthful. "Lady Sophia, I must admit, I was about to visit Westford Heights myself."

"You were?" Lady Sophia raised a brow, clearly surprised.

"Yes," Luke said, feeling suddenly shy. "I wanted to come to say sorry."

“How strange. I must admit, then, that an apology was also in my mind.”

“You have naught to be sorry for,” Luke said instantly. Sophia shook her head.

“My Lord, I realized that my words had upset you. I am sorry. I regret them. I do not think that our position in society is that important, truly I don’t.”

“My Lady…you owe me no apology,” he said gently. “Truly. I behaved churlishly.”

They looked at each other. Her green eyes held his, and he thought she looked amused, touched and saddened, all at once. He smiled, hesitantly.

“What?” he asked, not sure how to interpret her expression.

“My Lord…you truly don’t have to apologize,” she said softly. “I was the one who caused you hurt.”

He bowed, surprising himself. He looked up into her eyes as he stood. “My Lady, I reacted most foolishly. And I hope you can forgive me.”

“Yes,” she said, grinning. “I do.”

“Now, shall we go somewhere for tea?” Luke suggested. Again, he didn’t know where the words came from. He, Luke, who found it hard to ask a woman for a dance, never mind anything else, was asking her to join him? For tea?

“Yes,” Lady Sophia said, glancing towards the door, where her chaperone was watching the road, seemingly oblivious. “That would be very nice.”

Luke felt his heart soar.

“Well, then,” he said, reaching behind the desk for his coat, which was hanging on a peg on the wall. “I know of a fine teahouse in these parts. Shall we go there?”

“Now?” Lady Sophia giggled. He reddened.

“Why not?” he asked, consulting the clock on the shelf. “It is half an hour past ten.”

“A good time for tea,” Lady Sophia agreed. “Jane?” she called to her chaperone.

“Yes, My Lady?” She turned around instantly.

“Mr. Beaumont has offered to take us to tea.”

“Oh! That’s nice.” She beamed.

Luke felt some of the tension drain from him and he shrugged on his coat, reaching for his tophat as they left the premises. It was cold outside and he drew his coat about him, glad that Gilbert hadn’t planned on an early-morning trip to the coffee-house. He might have missed her.

“Please keep an eye on the shop for me,” he called to the shopkeeper next door. The man scowled over the door at him.

“Luke…this is the third time this week, you know! I’ll be expecting you to sit my shop for me sometime in return.”

“I will, I will, Barton.”

“Sir, if it is inconvenient…” Lady Sophia began, but he shook his head instantly.

“Lady Sophia, I assure you, it isn’t. The grumbling old fellow will do it readily enough. I’ll repay him, I assure you.”

Lady Sophia giggled, and they walked on.

As they rounded the corner, Luke racked his brains, thinking of something to say. He had walked for half a block without any inspiration, and he felt a need for it. The harder he tried to decide what to say, the more difficult it became, until he felt almost desperate.

An idea struck him.

“My Lady…how do you reckon we find more clues?” he asked. They were crossing the threshold into the tea-house. He stopped and took her cloak. It was years of being taught his manners – he did it without thinking.

“Thank you,” Lady Sophia said shyly. Luke smiled.

They looked at each other and he felt himself falling into the depths of those green eyes, drowning in their sweet depths. Her lips were so near, so moist and inviting, and all he wanted to do was lean forward and press his mouth to them, eager and warm.

“My Lady! Isn’t this a lovely tea-house?”

“Oh!” Sophia exclaimed, head whipping round to where Jane stood in the doorway. “Yes. Very lovely.” She looked up at Luke and he looked fondly back.

“Let’s go in,” he said. He remembered what he had asked her earlier, before he had been so distracted. “You have the book with you?” he asked.

“The book my father wanted me to see?” she asked. “Yes.” She reached for her purse, and the little leather-bound book was inside. She passed it to him and he took it, his finger brushing hers. He tensed, feeling like he’d rested his hand on the fireplace.

“I wonder if he left any more clues in here,” Luke said. “Shall we look?”

“Of course,” Sophia agreed.

They bent over the book. On page thirty-nine, the same clue that they’d read in the museum still stood, baffling them. Luke heard the proprietor come over and looked up.

“A pot of tea for three, if you please.”

“And a slice of jam tart,” Mrs. Braceley put in. She blushed and they all laughed.

“Make that two slices,” Lady Sophia said into the silence. Jane giggled. Luke couldn’t help feeling amused too.

“Three, if you please,” Luke agreed. “And please, Lady Sophia…allow me to settle the payments?”

“Thank you,” Lady Sophia said.

His eyes held hers.

“And thank you kindly, Sir.” Mrs. Braceley interrupted them.

They all laughed.

Luke looked at Sophia, sitting across the table, and found his lips lifting in a smile. It had been a long time since he had felt so happy. Here, with her, his heart seemed full of joy. He breathed in the scents of tea and cake and wondered why he had never noticed how finely perfumed the air in the tea-house was, and how good the cakes smelled.

“You have lived here in London long?”

“Oh.” Luke blinked, surprised by her question. “Well…not too long. About six years. I live about ten minutes away, by foot. I rent accommodation not far from here.”

“I see.” Sophia nodded. If she thought that distasteful, she certainly wasn’t showing it on her face. That made Luke feel relieved.

Maybe she hadn’t meant what she said, after all.

“You must have been a few times in London?” he asked, as the proprietor came back, setting a big pot of tea on the table in front of them. He set down three cups, one for each of them, and Luke tried to maintain eye-contact with Sophia around the contours of the man in the way.

“Yes. I was here for the season…last year, and the year before that, which was my debut.”

“I see.” Luke nodded. He tried to recall his own first season, and found he couldn’t. He had hated it; he knew that much. Being eyed by all the *Ton*, judged by them and found wanting – or not – had been something he couldn’t bear. He’d tried to get out of it every season thereafter. Cambridge had been a welcome refuge from London. “How did you find it?”

“Horrid,” she said, and her voice was warm, her face amused.

They both laughed. Again, Luke was struck by how amazingly easy discussion was with her. With other ladies, he felt as if he had to plan out every second; as if there was some sort of a booklet written in his mind and he must stick to the words in it, like an actor learning his lines. Now, he felt as if he could talk about anything and everything, and that all of it was utterly unpredictable.

“Jam tart, Sir, My Ladies?”

“Ah!” Luke nodded appreciatively, as big slices of jam tart, orange and appealing, appeared before each of them. Mrs. Braceley tucked in at once. Luke thought she seemed far more interested in her meal than she did in anything he and Lady Sophia discussed, so he braved another topic.

“Should we look in the book for more clues?” he asked, reaching for the book that lay beside his plate.

“Oh! Yes.” Lady Sophia nodded. “I quite forgot. That’s bad of me… Papa would find it most remiss.” She was smiling, though.

“I’m sure he’d just be delighted you followed his quest,” Luke said softly, meaning it. “It’s a very brave thing for a young lady to do. I know how daunting London can be and coming here alone.”

“Well, I do have Mrs. Braceley.” Sophia looked up at him warmly. “Though I thank you, Sir, for understanding.” Her voice was low. She looked at the table, where he’d moved the book to rest between them.

“Of course,” he said softly. Again, he became aware of how close her hand was to his, how easy it would be to reach across and take her fingers in his own.

“Now,” Sophia said, bending forward over the pages, “he says that it will lead us on to the next clue. How could it do that?”

“Maybe at the museum?” Luke suggested. He was also leaning over the pages of the book. He felt his head bump hers and straightened up instantly, cheeks red. “Oh!”

“Sorry,” Lady Sophia said, also red.

They looked at each other. Luke felt his body flood with heat again and looked away, cheeks crimson and hot. He could still feel the feeling of her hair brushing his face and he could smell the lavender scent of it, almost overpowering his sense.

"Now," Lady Sophia said, recovering first. "What else could it mean? He *may* have meant an exhibition in the museum, but I think even Father would be challenged by hiding a clue somewhere in such a great building, without being detected by the staff. No…I don't think he means to look in the museum."

"Mayhap not," Luke agreed. "What else could it mean, though?" he asked, reaching for the book. He was careful, this time, not to bump Lady Sophia. "All it says is that this will lead on to the next clue?" he frowned, confused.

"I know!" Sophia said, startling him. She plunged instantly into embarrassed silence.

"What is it?" he asked softly. "What do you think will lead us hence?"

"The book!" Sophia whispered. "Look! It must be somewhere nearby. This will lead us on to the next clue. He means the book!"

Luke nodded. "I think so," he agreed.

Sophia took the book and turned to the next page. Sure enough, on page forty-one, somebody had written another hand-written note in

the same neat, careful script. It must have been Charles.

"So," Sophia said, "here, he's written us some more instructions. What are they?"

Luke read them aloud, surprising himself. "In the biggest park in London, you will find a statue. Walk five steps north from this, and two steps south, and dig. You will find my next clue there."

"Father!" Sophia giggled. "He didn't really bury a clue in London, did he? How could he have?"

"He must have asked a friend to do it," Luke said softly. "Like he asked me."

"Alexander, Lord Melridge," she said instantly. "He was another dear friend of Father's. I am sure he did it. Father would have had a chance to get word to him, too – he visited just after you did." At the time, she'd barely noticed. She had been thinking only of how ill her father had been.

"Well, then," Luke said, "I suppose a visit to the park is in order."

"Which park?" Sophia asked.

"Richmond Park, I believe," he said. "It is by far the largest."

“Well, then,” Sophia said softly. “We shall have to go.”

“Today?”

“Why, Sir!” she exclaimed, making Luke go red. “I think that would be…” She shook her head, grinning. “Shall we?”

“If you have the time,” Luke said swiftly. “Of course, we could always go tomorrow…”

“I have time now,” Sophia said, looking uncomfortably away. “Jane? Have we an hour or two, to spend in Richmond Park?”

Jane, to Sophia’s surprise, nodded instantly.

“My Lady, of course we can. If Mr. Beaumont can spare an hour from the shop?”

Luke blushed. “I did ask my friend to keep his eye on it…since I owe him a favour, I might as well leave him there for another hour. We won’t be long.”

“That is…well, probably shocking, but it’s also funny.” Sophia gave him a humorous look.

Luke laughed too, and they stood and he settled the bill while Sophia and her chaperone went out into the street. He was looking forward to going to the park.

Chapter 15

Sophia walked excitedly down the pavement, feeling like her heart was soaring over her. She looked around the bright, airy street and then back towards their destination.

Mr. Beaumont was a little ahead, leading them down the narrow pavement. As if he had felt her eyes on him, he turned around.

“Almost there,” he said. “There are several gates to the park. We can use this one,” he added, showing a big wrought-iron gate in the palisade fencing.

“I’m very excited about this,” Sophia said softly. “I have never been to Richmond Park before.”

“It’s a deer park,” Luke explained as they went in through the gate. “It used to be used by the king for hunting deer, and then later on it was used as a royal residence, but our king moved his residence to Kew Palace, and Richmond House is no longer used. The public are allowed access, but I always feel a little like I’m trespassing.” He grinned shyly.

“Well, I am happy to trespass if you are also doing so.”

He looked at her warmly and they looked into one another’s eyes. She had the feeling that the whole of London – all the activity, the street bustling and crowded with people – was still and it was just them, alone there. Her excitement grew, and she tensed as he leaned

towards her. He cleared his throat.

“Shall we go in?”

“Yes,” she said softly. She followed him in shyly. Jane walked behind.

Had he thought to kiss her? She pushed the thought away. He had only met her a few days ago!

“So,” Luke said, his mood lifting as they walked down the stone-paved pathway. “We can head across to the pond, or we could go towards Richmond House. I don’t exactly know where the centre is. We could ask a gardener, if we see one.”

“Good idea.” Sophia looked at him warmly.

She walked beside him, looking around. The park was lush, green trees growing close together, bordering emerald lawns. She could see flowers, planted on one bank – rhododendrons in bright colours, shaded by the tall trees. She already liked it. Most of the park seemed half-wild, the hand of any gardener seemingly doing very little besides keeping a little order.

“It’s so beautiful,” she breathed. The lawns were spectacular – verdant green, the dew of morning still clinging to the grasses in shady spots, the scent of flowers heavy in the air.

“It is,” he agreed. He was looking around, and Sophia looked too,

hoping to locate a gardener. She stiffened.

“Something moved in there, Mr. Beaumont!” She pointed towards a bush, heart thudding. She had heard that some of the parks in London were dangerous – robbers lurked there, especially when there weren’t many other visitors, intent on parting hapless people from their purses.

“Don’t fret, My Lady.” He sounded fond. “Look! A deer.”

“Oh!” Sophia blushed. Her embarrassment was forgotten instantly as she watched it. The creature ran with exquisite grace, and she found herself staring.

“That was so beautiful,” she whispered.

“It was,” he said. He was looking at her. She went red.

The two of them were standing two paces apart. Sophia suddenly wished they were standing closer; her body washed through with warmth. He was so tall, and his body so well-muscled! She imagined what it would be like to be wrapped in his arms, those finely-made lips kissing her.

Sophia! Stop it, she told herself.

She looked around to where Jane was standing, still gaping at the gap in the hedge where the animal had passed through.

“Um, should we go?” Luke asked.

“Yes,” Sophia said softly.

They walked on down, following the path.

At a fork in the path, they were lucky enough to spot a gardener. He was busy cutting back one of the hedges, trimming it neatly to match the others near it. He looked up as Luke coughed meaningfully.

“Ah! Might you know where the centre of the park is?” Luke asked the man politely. The gardener tipped back his head, scratching behind an ear.

“Um…that way, I reckon, My Lord,” the man said, pointing down a path. “It’s round about where two paths meet. One coming up from the lake. Some bushes like this on the way. And a statue of sorts, right near the middle.”

“Oh!” Sophia felt a wash of excitement. The park seemed the perfect place for mysteries. It was vast, for starters – she could have been on the estate at Westford House, so big and spacious did it feel. From here, the street was inaudible. They could have been lost anywhere in the vast gardens in the countryside at home.

“So,” Luke said, turning to smile. He had such a shy smile, she thought – it touched her heart instantly. “Shall we go on? It seems like this

mystery is not too far out of our reach."

"Of course," Sophia nodded.

They went on. The gardener had pointed ahead, and so they followed the path. Sophia lifted her skirt a little as they crossed a muddy patch. Luke reached for her hand, helping her step over. She went red. The feeling of his hand on her arm was as if she was leaning on the grating…she felt as if his touch burned her, every finger leaving an impression on her body.

They went on. The narrow, tree-lined scenery gave way to wider fields, and then again to close trees. Sophia looked around, searching the bushes for deer or other animals. She felt excited.

"Now…here is a hedge," Luke said, startling her out of her reverie. "I wonder if this is the one he meant?" He gestured around them, where two tall hedges grew.

"Mayhap," Sophia murmured. She looked around, drawing her cloak closer. It was colder here, and she hoped they would move from the shadow soon.

After a hushed, silent walk among the hedges, they reached a space where the bushes opened out. The path they followed met another path, and Sophia looked around, excitedly.

"The place where two paths cross! I think we are here!" She gazed about, heart thumping. She felt a mix of emotions, looking around. Somewhere in this vast garden, in the centre of the biggest city, her

father had hidden something just for her.

“Is this the statue we seek?” Luke asked, pointing ahead.

“Yes!” Sophia said excitedly. “It must be. It must be the centre of the park – it fits the description. And there’s the statue.” She pointed to it also. It must have been a bust of some sort, but the face had been weathered badly by rain and sunshine and it was impossible to discern details. In itself, it made her think.

In life, whoever that bust was meant to show had been so respected that a statue had been raised to him. Now, nobody could even see his face. The respect of one age meant little in the next, sometimes. Was a place in society so worth fighting for?

It was a strange thought – utterly new to her. She pushed it aside to examine it later. She looked around them, trying to recall the words her father had written. She reached to the purse and took the book out of it, opening it again.

“When you reach the statue,” she walked to it. Luke followed her, leaning on it on the other side as she read. “Walk five steps north, then two steps south.” She frowned. “That way, correct?”

“Correct!” Luke gave her a fond look. “How did you deduce that so quickly?” he added, frowning. “I live here, and it took me a moment. You say you are almost never in London!” He looked surprised.

Sophia blushed. “I noticed the tower of a church sticking up when we came in by the gate, and recognized it as the one north of my house. I

know that, since then, we've walked only north, so we are now facing that direction."

"Incredible!" Luke looked at her warmly. Sophia went red.

"My father taught me a little," she said, feeling his praise flush her body. "We used to get lost on the estate, and try to find our way back. I didn't know I could still do it." She sniffed, feeling a wash of love for her father.

"You must have done remarkably well," Luke said with a grin. Sophia blushed.

"I don't know about that," she admitted, starting to pace out the distance. "I once led us to a charcoal-burning pit. My father tried not to find it funny."

They both laughed. Luke walked alongside her as she took the five steps forward, and then two back. She felt her heart thump as he did it with her. It seemed strange, to have them both following her father's instructions at once. Strange, and right.

"We should be here," she said, stepping back of the little circle of grass she stood on. "Now…how are we going to dig?" She blushed. She should have thought of that!

Luke looked at her warmly. "Allow me, My Lady?" he said. "I have a stick," he said, bending down with a hefty twig. He started to scratch the surface that had been marked by her footprints, and then moved aside the damp soil with his hands. Sophia felt guilty.

“Sir…you are too kind.”

“Not at all,” he said, scrabbling into the soil and then reaching for the stick, digging down further. “I am all too happy to be of assistance. Ah,” he added, frowning.

“What is it?” she asked.

“I felt something, but it’s not where I expected. It’s further up.”

“Your strides are small,” Jane said mildly.

“Oh!” Sophia went red, while Luke frowned.

“What was that?” he asked, starting to dig further up, creating a rut in the ground about a foot in length.

“My footsteps aren’t wide enough,” she explained. “Whoever buried it here must have been quite tall, with longer legs. So, the clue is buried higher than we thought it might be.”

“Oh, I see.” He nodded. “Well, I think it is…I definitely found something here when I was digging earlier…the stick hit something hard. Ah, here we go,” he said, and she held her breath as he started digging in earnest. It occurred to her that no nobleman she’d ever met

would dig the earth in Richmond Park for her! With his bare hands!

It's like something out of a fairytale.

She watched as he revealed a bottle. It was a glass one, like the cook might use when she made preserves, only with a longer neck, like a bottle for storing drink in. Luke pulled it out. It had a stopper in the neck. When Sophia cleaned the dirt off the side with a handkerchief, she could see a letter inside.

"Thank you," she said softly. He took it and pulled the stopper out. His hands were seamed in brown mud. She felt her heart flood with gratitude. "Now…we must find somewhere to clean your hands."

"There's a pond," Jane said mildly.

They both turned around and looked. Sophia grinned. Luke chuckled.

"Well, that's me fixed," he said. He went off towards the pond, walking with his loping stride. Sophia put her little finger in and tried to slide the note out of the bottle. On the second try, she managed. Jane walked with Luke towards the water's edge. Sophia followed, reading the note as she walked.

"Think about what you learned in the previous clue. Then, go back to the bookshop and read page twenty-two of the book."

Sophia stared. What sort of clue was that? She laughed.

“Luke!” she called. “Look at the clue!”

“What does it say?” Luke asked, standing and coming to join her. His hands were soaked, she noticed, and she reached into her pocket, taking out her handkerchief.

“Here,” she said. “You will be cold.”

“Thank you,” he said.

She went red as she reached out and placed the handkerchief in his palm. His skin was cold and damp, and yet touching it sent a flicker of joy through her body, so intense she felt her heart might stop.

He took the handkerchief from her fingers and dried his hands. He looked at it, the edge a little stained with mud and the cold water that had soaked his skin. He touched the embroidery at the edge of it, his finger pressing the little flowers she’d sewn around the rim.

“I am sorry…I spoiled it,” he said, touching the mud stain in the corner. “I am sure my butler could clean it up?”

“It isn’t spoiled,” she said softly. She would recall the day each time she looked at it, and that was precious for her. She looked up at him, eyes warm.

“Well, then. I shall keep it,” he said. He folded his hand around it and put it in his pocket. “If you would not object, I shall.”

“Of course,” she said swiftly, her cheeks flaming. “I would be pleased for you to keep it, Sir.”

“I could wish for no dearer token,” he murmured. He barely spoke, and when Sophia heard the words, she was sure she just imagined them. He could not have said that!

“So,” she said, clearing her throat to distract herself from her feelings. “My father’s note just says: “Think about what you learned in the last clue. Then, go back to the bookshop and read page twenty-two.” Not much there, is there?”

He grinned. “Well…I suppose we just have to do it. What did we learn?”

Sophia reddened, “You mean, apart from the really stupid thing I said about duty?”

“No,” he said gently, “including that. You know, My Lady, what you said made me think a great deal…” he began.

“I shouldn’t have said it,” she said swiftly. “Sir, it was thoughtless. I don’t even know where those words came from. I don’t think them.”

Luke smiled at her. “You don’t, no. But you were raised to think that. You know, I understand. I realized I was raised with much the same view. Only, I had a reason to examine it more closely, six years ago. So, I did. You’ve never really had to think about it until now.”

“Yes,” Sophia murmured. “I suppose.” She wondered what had made him think about it, but didn’t ask.

“Well…I reckon duty doesn’t do much for one, does it?” he asked with a grin.

Sophia put her head on one side, thinking. She had not really considered it in that light. After all, duty was all about what you did for others, and so why would she even consider it in that way? She coughed. “Well…no, I suppose not, but…”

“We need to think about it,” Luke said with a grin. “And this is what I think…Apart from maintaining your place in society, does duty do anything for you personally? Who says that class demands you follow rules? My mother tried to stop me from opening my bookshop because it was not fitting to my class and she was fearful of being rejected by her so-called friends. But I decided it was far more important to me to follow what I loved and frankly it hasn’t affected me personally; in fact, I am much happier in this life the way it is than I ever was as the youngest son of an earl, tied by all that duty and fashion.”

Sophia didn’t answer for a few moments as she was thinking deeply. Doing her duty in order to keep them all in the situation which was fitting to their class and status meant marrying George. Her mother said this was her duty, but her father seemed to be saying something different. Could he be saying that duty meant being loyal to yourself, to your heart?

She looked at him. “Could he be saying that the word duty means something different depending on who you are and how you live life?” she asked.

He looked delighted. “I think you’re onto something, Sophia! I really think you are. I wish we could write it down. It seems like we’ll need it later.”

Sophia grinned. “Don’t worry…I’ll remember,” she said softly.

It was a radical idea; one which she felt was already settling inside her and changing the way she saw things. It was as if her father had handed a key to her, one which was going to let her creep away from the prison in which she’d lived for so many years. But should she? She felt hesitant. It was safe to live the way she had, to believe the way she had. Could her father really want her to be loyal to herself? To what she felt inside?

“Should we go back?” she asked, gathering her cloak around her. “I feel cold.”

“Yes, of course,” Luke said swiftly. “We should go back now. It must almost be lunchtime!” he added, glancing at his watch. He tucked it back into his top pocket, reminding Sophia painfully of her own father. She swallowed hard.

“Yes. I should be back at the townhouse…Cook will be angry if I stay any longer.”

“And we’ll miss that delicious grilled fish she keeps on talking endlessly about,” Jane said.

They all laughed. The comment was exactly what they needed, Sophia thought – bringing them back to the banal things of everyday life. She shot a grateful look towards her chaperone.

“Come on,” she agreed. “Let’s go and find a coach. I will be pleased to take dinner. You have arrangements for lunch, Mister Beaumont?” she added.

He nodded. “I suppose. I always go to the coffee-house for sandwiches. I should hurry back.”

“Yes,” Sophia agreed. “Or you’ll be sitting in the shop across from yours for the rest of the week, returning that favour.”

They all laughed and Sophia felt her spirits lift. They hailed a coach, and they all rode together as far as the bookshop, and then she continued on with Jane alone, back to her lodgings.

“That was a fine trip!” Jane commented, walking up the stairs to the door just ahead. Sophia nodded.

“Yes, it was,” she murmured. “A fine trip. I will be pleased to sit down and take a good meal.”

“Me too, My Lady,” Jane nodded. “Me too, indeed.”

Sophia wandered upstairs to change her clothes for luncheon. She couldn't stop her mind from racing with the events of the morning, and all that they had learned. She was confused by the statements, and curious about the ideas. And she couldn't wait to discover where the quest led them.

She was especially excited about the next visit to the bookshop.

She could not stop thinking about Mr. Beaumont, and the way he touched her hand, and his lovely smile.

Chapter 16

The bookshop was quiet when Luke walked in early in the morning. He went through to the storeroom where he'd spent the previous afternoon dragging boxes of books out, rearranging the shelves. He looked around, noticing that almost all the stock must be on the shelves now. He had worked hard yesterday, struggling and sweating and trying to forget his emotion.

"That was quick."

He went to his desk, but found he could not settle to anything. His mind was still with Lady Sophia. He could not stop thinking of her.

"And what do you think she thinks of you?" he asked himself with a sniff. He was a lowly bookshop owner, and she was certainly not dreaming of him the way he dreamed.

He sniffed. The irony was that he was not any lower than her in birth or status. Or at least, he hadn't been.

"I am happy with my bookshop," he told himself firmly.

He looked around. His heart ached. He was exchanging a chance with that beautiful young lady for this place, and right now, it didn't seem worth it. He wanted her so much that it kept him from his sleep.

“Luke, you’re a fool. There isn’t anything or anyone worth your freedom.”

He pushed one of the boxes aside savagely. He knew what he needed – his manservant was good with the sword, having been in the army at one time. What he needed was to have a good bout of fighting. It would calm him.

He had never been in line for the earldom, but he would have been accepted in society as the earl’s younger son – and brother of the heir as well – if he hadn’t walked away. He had exchanged that status for following his dreams, and now he was angry with himself – he had been stupid.

“Damn duty,” he swore. “Damn society. Damn me.”

He had managed to expend some energy on moving boxes out of the storeroom when he heard the doorbell ring.

“Good morning,” Lady Sophia said, walking in. She looked pleased to see him.

“Good morning.” He swiftly bowed. His hair was standing on end, he was sure of it! He hoped he didn’t sound disgruntled. He cleared his throat quickly.

“Sir, I hope this is a possible time for us to meet. If you would prefer to discuss things later, I can return later…I just thought that during your lunchtime you could spare a minute or two,” she began.

“Please, come in,” Luke said hastily. “I’m delighted to see you. Of course, I can spare a moment. Is it lunchtime?”

“It’s a quarter to twelve,” Lady Sophia said.

“Oh! Good.” He grinned. “Sorry…the morning must have passed by so quickly that I barely noticed the time going. Well, then. Please, come in and sit down. Excuse me…it’s been a busy morning and I’m a little tired. I would be more than happy to discuss things.” He felt his heart soaring. He had half-expected that she was not going to come back. He kept on telling himself that she wasn’t really interested and was only being polite.

“Thank you,” Lady Sophia said. “Jane?” She gestured to the table and the two chairs. There was a stool, where Jane could easily have sat, but she remained standing.

“Thank you, My Lady, but I prefer by the window,” Jane said. She gestured to the windowsill, where she leaned, watching the street. Luke nodded.

“Lady Sophia, what was it you wished to discuss?” he asked, hastily making room on the desk and pushing a chair out for her to sit down at. He really had been out of society for too long and he had to try and remember his manners!

“I was hoping to discuss the next clue,” she said. She looked warmly across at Luke as he took a seat opposite, and he felt himself flush red. He enjoyed her company. He also felt extremely shy of her, which he knew was ridiculous – he just couldn’t help it.

She was sitting opposite him with her hair loose about her shoulders. He thought that she had arranged it in a simple style that day – he had become used to the more elaborate styles she had worn the previous days, and this was something new. It suited her, he thought. She had never struck him as the sort of lady to wear hairpins and to fuss about a hair being out of place, like so many society women he knew. She seemed too free-spirited for that; too ready for fun and enjoyment and he was delighted to see that she was dressing more simply. He thought that it was far more in line with her character, and he really thought it suited her much better – the curls resting against her pale soft skin, her cheeks slightly flushed and her green eyes full of warmth and a sense of sparkling humour.

“Of course,” he said swiftly. “Well, then. Have you the poetrybook?”

She nodded. “Here it is. My father says we must turn to page twenty-two. Or, that was the instruction on the last clue that he left us, at any rate.”

“Yes.” Luke nodded. “It was indeed.”

He waited, watching her while she paged through the book to the relevant page. He thought her hands were so elegant – long-fingered and smooth – and he ached to touch them. He looked studiously away.

“Here we are!” she said, opening the book and putting it between them. “Ah! More instructions.”

Luke read the instructions and couldn’t help being amused by them.

“Read this poem and spend the next three days discussing it. Then, turn to page forty-six for your next clue.”

Luke grinned. Lord Westford had a singularly unusual mind. He wished he’d known the turmoil the poor fellow must have been in, knowing that he was going to pass soon, and intent on leaving something to his daughter.

“Well, then,” Lady Sophia said, calling him back to the current moment. “We just have to read the poem then. Not much else to it.”

Luke chuckled. “Shall we read it aloud, or silently?”

“I don’t know yet,” Lady Sophia grinned, cheeks red. “What if it is, well…not for reading aloud?” She flushed.

Luke nodded. “Let’s read it silently first, then,” he agreed. He leaned forward and rested his own hand on the book, an inch away from hers.

We are like an arched bow with the arrow in place.

Let us become straight and release the arrow toward the target.

We have stayed at home, scared like mice.

Let us find the courage and join the lions.

Let our souls turn into a mirror, longing to reflect the essence of beauty.

Let us begin the journey home.

He finished reading the poem and looked up at her. She nodded.

“Incredible,” she murmured. “So beautiful.”

“It is, isn’t it?” he replied. “I have never read anything like that.”

“Me neither,” Lady Sophia breathed. “And, well…even though it’s difficult to understand exactly what the poet means; I feel as if I understand it, somehow.”

“Me too,” Luke nodded.

“It feels as if it speaks in my heart, and my heart knows what it means,” Lady Sophia said softly. “Even though my mind does not. Silly, really,” she said, sinking into silence.

“Not at all,” Luke said. “It’s not in the least bit silly to say that. I feel like that too. Shall we discuss it line by line, do you think?”

“Maybe,” Lady Sophia said softly.

Luke looked around. Mrs. Braceley had taken a seat at the shop-front, and she looked like she felt quite comfortable. He felt his stomach ache and looked across at the clock on the wall. It was twelve o’ clock. He had an idea.

“My Lady,” he asked, “I would be honoured to take you and your companion to the inn for lunch. If you would accompany me it would make me very happy.”

Lady Sophia looked up at him, seeming delighted. “Sir, that would be…I would like that very much,” she said, glancing across at Mrs. Braceley who was still staring through the window as if everything out there was tremendously exciting. “Well, I would like that, but of course, we’d have to be accompanied, and be sure to be back here by one o’ clock,” she finished shyly.

“Of course,” Luke nodded, going pink. He would of course do his best to respect propriety at all costs. “I suggest we go to the Reaper’s Rest Inn…it’s not far from here, and we could be sure to be back in an hour. It’s quite nice,” he added, trying to allay any confusion.

“Well, then,” Lady Sophia said softly. “Of course, we shall go there. Jane?” she called to the woman by the window, who nodded. “We are going to go to the inn for lunch.”

“Oh! How I do like the sound of that,” Mrs. Braceley said, looking very glad about it. “Well, Sir! This is a nice afternoon. Where shall we go?”

“The Reaper’s Rest,” Luke said, standing and reaching for his tophat. He pulled on a coat and felt as if all of London was staring at him as he stepped out beside Lady Sophia. She was dressed in her black cloak and a black dress decorated with blue. He was sure all the dandies in London would wish they were in his shoes. He grinned as he walked down the street, listening to Lady Sophia as she commented on their surroundings.

“This area is not quite as busy as it was,” she commented, taking his arm as they crossed the street. He felt his cheeks go red. He was aware of her with every nerve.

“I suppose everybody is having lunch,” he said, looking about them. She was right – the bustling street was comparably empty, only one or two people still pausing to look in shop windows or crossing the street towards the restaurant on the other side.

“I do prefer a quieter road,” Lady Sophia said softly. “I find the city so daunting.”

“Me too,” Luke admitted. “Or I did, six years ago. Now, I’m used to it.” He smiled to himself. He could not imagine living anywhere else – he couldn’t think of what it would be like not to shoulder his way past crowds, swearing and cursing at him as he passed. He couldn’t think of what it would feel like not to be able to wander out of the shop and across to Tatfield’s for a bite during the day or most of the night.

“You’ve lived here all this time?” Sophia asked. “Where did you live before?”

“Oh, Averley,” Luke said, recalling the rolling fields and the house with its lovely garden. He had never felt at home there, though he had to admit he did miss the beautiful countryside. Much of London was not beautiful – not like that. The rolling green fields and the sweet-smelling flowers were something he missed, now.

“Is that in Kent?”

“On the border,” Luke said, gesturing north of London. “I haven’t been there for six years.”

“I see,” Lady Sophia said. She looked sad and Luke grinned, trying to lift her spirits.

“Well, I don’t know if I’d want to, after so long. I rather like my London apartment and the coffee-house where your arm sticks to the table.”

“What?” Lady Sophia giggled. She looked up at him, green eyes round and smiling.

“Well, they sometimes don’t wipe the table down too well.” Luke chuckled. “Or they do wipe it down, but someone spilled sugar, so wiping it down only makes it sticky. And it’s pretty dark in there, you see, so seeing what you’re doing – if you happen to be making it clean – isn’t very easy.”

“Oh!” Lady Sophia giggled. “It sounds like quite a place! Shall we attend it, do you think?”

“No!” Luke said instantly, and they both laughed. He sounded so certain that it was the worst idea ever, and she laughed happily.

“Well, I shall enjoy the inn, and count myself fortunate that I am not taking lunch in the local coffee-house.”

They were both still laughing as they went into the inn. Luke stood back in the doorway, removing his hat and shrugging out of his coat. It was stiflingly warm inside, and his eyes took a moment to adjust to the darker shadows inside too. He spotted the proprietor and greeted him formally.

“Good morning! A table for three. Perhaps in the parlour?” he suggested. He could hear people in the main room, which wasn’t necessarily good. This was a fine lady! He couldn’t expect her to eat downstairs in the dining-room with everyone else.

“Of course, Sir…a table is free in the inn parlour. I shall be up directly.”

Luke nodded, and took Lady Sophia’s bonnet and cloak. He waited for Mrs. Braceley to take off her cloak too. He felt a little ill as they all sat down to order their meal…he might have to write to his brother and ask him for an extension on the allowance.

“So,” Lady Sophia said, turning to him as they sent the proprietor off with a promise of three plates of mutton stew. “We need to discuss this poem.”

“Ah! Yes. Yes, we do.” Luke nodded, feeling discomforted. Mrs. Braceley was, however, staring down the road through the window without paying them any particular attention, and he felt less shy. “Well…I think that the first part is straightforward – the bit with the arrow, I mean.”

“Oh?” she asked. She looked up at him, interested, and he blushed. He wasn’t used to being the centre of such delightful attentions. “Well…I thought that it simply meant, don’t hesitate. I mean…” He gestured. “If we think of a bow, held by an archer, just waiting to let fly the arrow, we imagine tension and force, all held back. I think the poet wants us to stop hesitating, and set it free.”

“Oh, yes!” Lady Sophia clapped. “A lovely image!”

“Three bowls of stew,” the proprietor intoned, bringing them back to the moment. “And a sliced loaf.”

“Oh! Thank you.” Luke nodded. He looked around the room. The inn parlour was much smaller than the dining-room, with panelling and a wooden floor, a big fire burning to heat the place. He leaned back, feeling relaxed. The inn parlour might be more expensive, but it was worth it not to have every trader and weaver commenting on your clothes, your manners and your words.

“This smells wonderful,” Lady Sophia said, taking a slice of warm bread, the savoury scent filling the air between them. “Oh, Mr. Beaumont…I am pleased! You’re introducing me to another side of London.”

“I hope a good side,” Luke said, reaching for a spoon. The stew

smelled delicious and he laid his napkin on his knee, eager to sample it.

"I'd reckon it's a good side, what with stew like this one," Mrs. Braceley said, making them grin.

"I can't say fairer than that," Lady Sophia laughed. "If Jane thinks it's good, I have to agree with her."

"Agreed," Luke said.

They all ate their stew. Luke found himself watching Sophia as she ate. She was so delicate, and yet she did spill some stew on her chin. He ached to lean over and wipe it off but she did so herself, blushing as she dabbed at it.

"Oh, that was silly," she said, laying her napkin on her knee. Luke tensed.

"My Lady…it was charming," he said gently. "You are too harsh when you judge yourself."

She met his gaze and he could see surprise there, as well as consideration. He thought that perhaps, finally, she would start to question the strict home she'd had. Like himself, she would slowly start to step away from the unfairness and coldness and let herself be free.

They spent the rest of the lunchtime talking and enjoying the delicious stew, and Luke was amazed by how quickly the time passed. When he heard the clock chiming fifteen minutes to one, he stood up.

"We should go," he said. They had all finished eating, and he needed to get back. He bowed apologetically. "I must open at one o' clock, or risk losing some customers."

She nodded. "Of course, Sir. I enjoyed that thoroughly. You too?" she asked Mrs. Braceley, who nodded.

"It was a fine lunch, My Lady," he said. "I know I haven't had such a fine meal in years."

Lady Sophia laughed, and Luke thought he had never seen such a sweet laugh. He beamed.

"I am pleased to hear that…I'm not sure what the cook at the house will think of that, but I shan't tell her. If you don't," Lady Sophia added. Her companion beamed.

"I won't, My Lady."

As they went down the stairs from the inn, Luke found himself wondering about the rest of the poem. He was surprised when Lady Sophia looked up at him, eyes wide.

"Mr. Beaumont? I was thinking about the last section…the bit where

he talks about staying at home. And finding our courage?" she looked up, eyes damp.

"Yes?"

"Is it so terrible, to have not had courage to leave home before?" Lady Sophia asked softly.

"It's not terrible at all," Luke said. "It's wonderful to have found the courage. One of the hardest things we could be called to do is defend ourself. So often, we find courage for everything else, but defending ourselves? We usually don't."

Sophia nodded. "That is true. And thank you, Mr. Beaumont."

"You have nothing to thank me for," he said softly. Seeing her eyes so wide and surprised made his heart ache. She should not feel as if she had no courage! He knew how hard it was to defy your family, when you'd been brought up to think you owed them your soul. "Nothing at all, My Lady."

"Mr. Beaumont?"

"Luke," he said. He hadn't even thought about it; the word just slipped from his lips unbidden.

"Luke," she said softly. She looked up at him, eyes wide with surprise.

“What was it you were going to say?” he asked. They were at the foot of the stairs, and she was standing beside him, her eyes fixed on his face. She swallowed hard.

“I was going to say I would see you tomorrow. We have to discuss the poem, after all.”

He grinned. “Yes, My Lady,” he said. “We have to discuss the poem, quite thoroughly.”

He walked back with them to the bookshop, and then tried to convince Lady Sophia to let him walk her back to the coach, but she insisted that he had to stay and work, and in the end he let her go with a promise to meet tomorrow during their lunch hour.

“Thank you, Charles,” he whispered.

He had no idea if he would have had the courage to pursue Lady Sophia without his help. But, as it happened, courage was exactly what they were talking about – and, he reminded himself, he had to think about it, because he had to prepare for their discussion tomorrow.

Chapter 17

Sophia heard the noise in the street, the sounds of busy shouts and horses' hoofs on roads waking her slowly from a deep sleep. She sat up at once. The clock on the mantelpiece said eight o' clock and she felt calmer when she saw it. She was not going to be late to meet with Mr. Beaumont. In fact, they still had plenty of time. She leaned back against the pillows, looking about the room.

"I am glad I finally slept deeply."

Thoughts of Mr. Beaumont had kept her awake for longer than she had expected. She kept on seeing his face, and remembering that moment when he'd asked her to call him by his first name.

"Luke."

He had introduced himself as Luke Beaumont, but only now had she really had a chance to think about the name. She thought it a nice name. And saying it aloud made her cheeks flush and her heart thump.

She shut her eyes, letting the lovely sensation flood through her a moment longer before getting out of bed and going over to pull the bell-rope to summon Jessie. She slipped her feet into silk slippers. Her father had brought those back for her from India. They were pure silk and decorated with a tiny pattern of embroidery, intricate and beautiful. She looked down at them now, her heart full of emotions.

“Oh, Father,” she whispered. “I wish I knew why you’d done this – set this quest for me. But I thank you.”

He had known her so well.

She had needed the distraction of the quest to take her mind from the terrible loss. He must have known that, and the thought of him providing for her even then made her blink back tears.

She looked around the room. Her hair accessories were strewn on the dressing-table, but otherwise the room was neat and clean, the white wallpaper sheened by the morning light. She was starting to like it here. She enjoyed the way she had her own little household here and could do as she wished without fear of censure or the need to be well-behaved.

She rang the bell to call her maid, wishing that she could stay here just a little longer. But she only had leave for two weeks.

“Good morning, My Lady,” Jessie said, coming in a minute or two later. She was carrying Sophia’s cloak, and Sophia nodded to the chair for her to put it down. She felt cold, despite the early morning sunshine, and considered her wardrobe carefully.

“My Lady?” Jessie asked, opening the curtains and checking the fire.

“Yes?” Sophia asked, untying her hair from the tie it had been held back in during the night, and letting it cascade around her shoulders. “What is it, Jessie?”

“Well, I was only wondering where you’ve been off to every day this week.”

“Why…just into town. I was…on business from my father’s will,” Sophia said carefully. What else could she say? She didn’t understand why she was hesitating about telling Jessie. She was a good friend.

“I see, My Lady,” Jessie said. “So…you’re still mourning?”

“Yes,” Sophia said instantly. “I mean, customarily certainly. And in my heart definitely.” She looked away, knowing that her sorrow was still too immense for tears. It would be a long while before she would be able to express her grief for her father with crying.

“I know,” Jessie said gently. “I know, My Lady. I was just asking because, well…I reckoned it would be nice if you wore some bright colours again.” She looked up at her nervously.

Sophia felt touched. She had expected censure, but Jessie clearly thought she deserved more freedom, not less. And she could acknowledge, in her heart, that she would love to. She would have so enjoyed wearing some of her pretty dresses to the meetings with Luke.

“I cannot, Jessie,” she said softly. “I must wear dark colours another month.” It was custom. Her duty.

“Well, maybe,” Jessie said, putting her head on one side thoughtfully, “but you could have a prettier dress than the ones you have, My Lady.

Just because they're dark doesn't mean they can't be a bit, well… fancy."

Sophia laughed. "I wish I could agree…" she gestured at her three gowns – black, blue and brown –arranged in the wardrobe. "But I couldn't possibly go and have another made up. I would have to charge it to the household accounts, and then…" She trailed off. She felt sick. Her mother had made it clear that they could not afford to get clothes for the Season, and thoughts of the finances made her immediately think of Lord Cull and her mother's plans for her.

"Well, you could do, My Lady," Jessie said with a smile. "You could have just one. Maybe this colour?" she gestured at the brown. "But cut a bit nicely."

"I would like that so much," she said, emotion making her voice tight. "But I cannot risk charging it to the accounts. Mama said we could not afford more clothes."

"She couldn't have meant *no more* clothes," Jessie said reasonably. "You'll need more one day!"

Sophia had to smile. "No…I suppose she didn't really mean no more clothes ever," she agreed.

She could certainly have a dress made while she was here. Probably nobody would mind if she said she was staying modish and trying to keep up appearances. She decided to at least consider it.

While Jessie brushed her hair, she imagined the dress she would like.

If it had to be dark, she'd like it to have beautiful sleeves that draped her arms, and a neckline to show her neck. She would also like it to fit nicely across the bust and have a skirt that fell from the high waist to her toes. She wished she had such a dress and could show Mr. Beaumont.

"Well, since we talk of dresses, which shall I take out for you today?" Jessie asked as she finished brushing her hair.

"This one, please," Sophia said, reaching for the one nearest. It had a nice neckline that came to a point, showing off her long neck.

When she was dressed, she went down for breakfast and found Jane sitting there.

"Will we go to the inn?" Jane asked at once.

Sophia felt surprised. "You really didn't mind, Jane?" she asked. "I mean…the inn, and everything?"

"Of course not," Jane said. "I haven't had such good food in years."

They both laughed. Sophia was looking forward to going to see Luke. It was only nine o' clock by the time they'd finished breakfast, and she turned to Jane.

"May we go into town a little early?" she asked. "I just…" she paused. "Well…I recalled I have an allowance for clothing and the like, and I

haven't spent all of it."

She had made up her mind. She deserved one new dress.

"My Lady!" Jane looked happy. "Of course! Why, we haven't gone near a shop! I would dearly love to see the shops in London! How grand they must be, I reckon." She smiled, her gaze thoughtful as she imagined all the shops they would see.

Sophia nodded and made a mental note to buy something nice for Jane while they were in town. She felt very fortunate in the women who had accompanied her on this trip. She could not have chosen better companions.

Sophia watched out of the windows eagerly as the coachman passed by the big shops and on towards the smaller streets, where seamstresses and hat-makers had their premises. She couldn't wait to see what there was on offer. She had brought the remainder of her allowance with her, and, at a pinch, it would be possible to buy a dress. She hadn't been shopping in a year, and never without her mother.

"Jane…do you think this colour suits me?" she asked shyly as the coach rolled along. They were stopped behind a wagon that had halted unexpectedly, and she had a moment to consider what they were going to buy.

"Yes! I do, My Lady. I think it brings out the shade of your eyes most becomingly," Jane said, looking up from her sewing work.

“Oh good.” Sophia nodded. “Thank you.”

She would definitely look for something similar. And she knew exactly the pattern for it. She had seen it in the Gazette. She couldn’t wait for it to be done so that she could show Mr. Beaumont! It would make her feel pretty, and she reckoned that was no bad thing, after all. She’d been wearing mourning dress for almost two months. It was a tiny act of rebellion against her mother’s rules.

They arrived at Mrs. Headley’s couturière after half an hour’s coach-ride. The weather was cooler than it had been and Sophia clutched her cloak around her, holding Jane’s arm as they went up the street together. The street was not particularly crowded, which was surprising for a weekday morning. A gentleman stood by the window of a hat-shop. As they passed, Sophia glanced at him.

“No!” she whispered under her breath. She turned away instantly, heart racing.

It was Lord Cull. And he’d looked straight at her.

“What is it, My Lady?” Jane asked softly.

“Nothing,” Sophia said quickly, covering her fear. She didn’t want to tell Jane, because that would oblige her to do something about having seen him. She was supposed to be here so Lord Cull could call on her. While Jane supported her visits to Mr. Beaumont, she was sure she would also expect her to do her duty. “I just had a bit of a scare is all.”

“Of course, My Lady. This street is mortal eerie for this time of day.

Let's hurry and go in."

Sophia sighed with relief as Jane led her into the dressmaker's establishment. She felt safer when the door was shut.

What if he'd seen her?

She kept on thinking of him, memories flooding her mind suddenly. She could almost hear his voice, almost feel him walking beside her, eyes boring into hers. She could hear his offers, and see that expressionless, strangely threatening look. Just the thought of him was disturbing – but didn't she owe it to her family to visit him?

"Good morning, My Lady," Mrs. Headley greeted her with a curtsey, interrupting her thoughts. "How can I help you?"

"We came in with the interest of ordering a day-dress," Sophia said, recovering from the shock. "I would like it drawn up to this pattern." She reached into her handbag automatically and brought out the page of the Lady's Gazette, torn out to show the dressmaker. She spotted the little book in there as well and her mind went instantly to Mr. Beaumont.

I wish I could tell him about Lord Cull.

That was ridiculous! Her duty to her mother was to receive visits from Lord Cull, not to gad about town with Mr. Beaumont! She shut her eyes a moment, trying to find calm. She had managed to forget about that man during the last few days, but seeing him brought all her problems rushing back.

“My Lady?” Jane murmured. “You are sure you’re well? You look quite pale.”

“I’m well,” Sophia said hastily. “If we could see your taffeta?” she asked the seamstress quickly, recovering her equilibrium. “I would like something close to this colour.” She pointed to the dress she wore.

“Of course, My Lady.”

They found some brown taffeta in a paler shade than the dress she was wearing –a brown more like cocoa than ebony-wood. Sophia looked at her reflection, the taffeta draped about her shoulders. She felt surprise replace her sick dread from earlier.

She looked good.

“That looks lovely,” Jane affirmed.

Sophia twisted left and right, watching the way the colour shifted on the taffeta and how it seemed to make the reddish lights in her hair shine brighter as well as highlighting the shadows under her cheekbones. She looked more mature, but still with a sparkle in her green eyes.

“I like it,” she whispered.

She felt stronger, more grown up. She wanted it. She wanted to feel independent.

"My Lady, a wise choice. I believe we'll need eight feet of it?" the seamstress took the taffeta from her hands and they calculated the cost – which was exactly the price Sophia could afford. The seamstress noted down Sophia's measurements while Jane watched the street from the window.

"Jane…wouldn't you like fabric for a scarf?" Sophia asked, looking to how Jane was studying a roll of pink fabric. It was muslin and not particularly expensive, and Sophia knew how well it would suit her young chaperone.

"Why, My Lady! I couldn't…" Jane said. She touched the fabric wistfully.

"Could you add a foot of that fabric to the bill?" Sophia said to the seamstress.

"Certainly, My Lady."

"Lady Sophia…" Jane protested as they went back into the entrance. "You shouldn't have! I need no scarves…"

"You liked it. And you encouraged me to have something beautiful. The least I can do is do likewise."

Jane squeezed her hand, looking moved. Sophia just looked warmly at her. It was so good to have Jane here – the closeness was almost like that of a sister; one Sophia had never experienced in her life before.

"My Lady…Thank you."

"Think nothing of it."

When they left the dress-shop, Sophia felt dread twist her stomach. She walked slowly through the door, half-expecting Lord Cull to be there on the doorstep, waiting to whisk them off to a tea-house or in some other way enforce his odious presence in her existence. His stern eyes would study her, and she could almost hear that detached voice reprimanding her for her frivolous spending. She knew it was ridiculous, but she found him deeply disturbing, and the duty that went with him was even more onerous.

Her mother expected her to see him.

"My Lady, there's the coach there," Jane said, beaming as she pointed down the street. "He must have waited for us."

"Yes," Sophia said, feeling relieved. She had dreaded a long wait in the street, where anyone could walk over – including Lord Cull. As they bundled into the coach and it turned in the street, she felt her posture slump wearily forward. She hadn't realized that every second of their time in the shop she'd been dreading him coming in to find her.

“On to the inn, then?” Jane asked, waiting to call up instructions to the coachman.

“No,” Sophia said hastily. She wanted to see Mr. Beaumont, but the conflict of duty was too much for her. She felt guilt twist her innards. She could not bear the thought of seeing Mr. Beaumont, talking with him and doing the quest when she was supposed to be here to take visits from Lord Cull.

But what about your duty to your father? Her mind taunted. What about that? Is your duty to your mother more important? You need to see Mr. Beaumont.

No. I do not. I have been doing wrong every day. I should not have come. I should go back and I certainly should not tarnish my reputation.

“Lady Sophia?”

“No,” Sophia murmured. “Sorry, Jane; but I must hurry back. I feel a little ill,” she added quickly.

“My Lady!” Jane said at once, sounding worried. “I am so sorry to hear that. It’s this chill wind. It never is good to get so cold. We must get you home at once.”

“Yes. Thank you,” Sophia murmured. She leaned back in the coach, shutting her eyes. She couldn’t bear the thought of missing the lunch with Mr. Beaumont, but at the same time, she couldn’t stomach the idea of defying her mother that much. Buying the dress had been

defiance enough. She could not do more. She felt the roll of the coachwheels and heard the shouts of market vendors as they rumbled past the marketplace. She felt each sound like a lash on her skin and she wanted to just get home.

They arrived at the townhouse and Sophia hastened upstairs to her bedchamber.

“My Lady?”

“Excuse me, Jane,” Sophia said quickly. “I still feel something ails me and would like to lie down. The chill wind must have affected me.” She hated lying, but it was not entirely untrue. She really did feel sick, though she knew her confusion and emotions were a large part of that.

“Do you need something? A nice tea, perhaps?” Jane asked kindly.

“No, thank you, Jane,” Sophia said, already turning back to the stairs. “I’ll be fine. Rest is all I need.”

In her bedchamber, she went over to the window and leaned on the sill. The street was full of people and coaches, men with barrows pushing their wares towards the market, and people on horseback swearing and cursing as the wagons blocked their way. She saw none of it. Her mind felt utterly empty.

She could not believe that for the past week she had not even considered her duty.

“Father,” she said softly, “what did you mean by your words? Did you really want me to rebel?” she sat down on her bed and felt her fingers twist the fabric of her gown, a nervous habit. None of this made sense. She wished her father was here to explain his words.

She recalled the last clue her father had left them, the poem. She was meant to be discussing it with Mr. Beaumont right now. It had said to find courage; to be free.

“But, Father…I will hurt so many people if I do that!” she spoke her thoughts aloud. She would ruin her family if she was seen with Mr. Beaumont! He might be a nobleman, but he ran a bookshop! And her mother would never forgive her if the word spread around town.

She curled up on the bed. She really did feel ill, though it was from the immense confusion that possessed her. She had been raised to value nothing higher than duty. All she was supposed to do in life was uphold the family’s honour. And her father’s words taunted her, prickling across her thoughts like a hair shirt on the skin.

She imagined Mr. Beaumont. He would wonder what had happened to her and she wished she could tell him, but she needed time to think. Should she seek out Lord Cull and do as her mother wished?

Was that what her father would have wanted? Was that what society would expect?

“I can’t do this,” she whispered under her breath.

She pulled the bell to call Jessie, and asked her to help her to get ready for bed. She really did feel ill and she could think of nothing else to do except to rest and hope it made more sense that evening.

Chapter 18

Luke looked around the inn parlour, feeling uneasy. He wondered where Lady Sophia was. He had assumed she was delayed, but it seemed strange that whatever delay it was would take a full twenty minutes…she was always so punctual in the past.

He could hear traffic in the street, the sound muffled by the thick glass of the windows. The atmosphere in the inn parlour was stifling, the seconds seeming to pass by like treacle with the crackle of the fire and the occasional rustle of newspaper from the table next door the only sounds to disturb his concentration.

“I’ll wait another fifteen minutes,” he told himself, leaning back in his chair. He would take luncheon while he was here, too, since he needed to be back at the shop by half-past one. He could not ask anyone else to look after the shop again after the last few days. He would have liked to wait longer, but he needed to work.

“Pie and ale?” the proprietor asked him as Luke beckoned him from the doorway with a lift of the hand. The parlour was almost empty, as it had been yesterday – one other gentleman sat at the window, but he was absorbed in his Gazette and Luke knew he would not have noticed if a crowd of townsfolk had filled the room.

“Yes, please.” He nodded. “Ale and pie, if you please.”

He glanced out of the window as the proprietor left. The sky was grey, but the weather did not seem unusually bad. The coach from Westford Heights could not have been delayed by rain. What had happened?

He was distractedly reading the Gazette himself when the proprietor returned with his lunch.

“Thank you,” he said absently, sipping the ale. He tried to stay calm. The proprietor placed a plate of pie, green beans and carrot before him, the smell savoury and delicious.

“Probably just got delayed,” he told himself firmly. “I’ll leave a note with the proprietor, should she arrive late.”

He called for pen and paper and scribbled a brief note for Lady Sophia on a page.

Had to go back to the shop. I missed our conversation. I trust all is well and I hope to see you tomorrow at the inn for lunch instead? Yours, L.B.

He read through it again and waved the proprietor over when he came to refill the ale-jug of the other customer. He thought it sounded neutral enough – no hint of how worried he was or how he was speculating about why she was late.

“Could you see to it that this is delivered to the young lady who accompanied me yesterday?” he said as the proprietor returned. “Should she come here and look for me,” he added, “I would like her to know that I was here but called away.”

“Of course, Sir. I’ll do that.” He tucked the note into the pocket of his apron.

Luke watched him go down to the front desk. He didn't like the thought of the proprietor knowing his business, but what could he do? He had to leave her word.

He finished his pie – he was hungry, but felt a little queasy after eating. It must be the unease, he thought. He checked his watch, noticed he still had fifteen minutes, and decided to walk back by way of the nearby park.

"Luke!" a voice hailed him urgently. Luke turned around. He was walking in the park down a stone path towards the gateway. Where had the voice come from?

"Luke!" the voice called again. It was, he noticed, coming from the bushes. He walked over, pulse racing. It was a male voice. Why would someone hide in the park and accost him? He looked around.

"Oh! Gilbert! You startled me," Luke said, frowning. His friend was standing behind a bush, concealed in the thicket by the fences. "Gilbert…why are you hiding behind a tree?"

"That's Lady Amelia," Gilbert said in a soft voice, pointing to a young lady wearing a blue dress. She was walking with another slightly older lady dressed in yellow. "I'm hiding because I'm wearing my worst suit. Look at me, Luke. Would any self-respecting lady want her chaperone to see this?"

Luke put his head on one side, observing him. His friend was wearing a black suit – long trousers and a velvet coat – that fitted him well.

The coat was threadbare and the trousers needed a mend. Other than that, he looked alright. “Well, apart from the tear in the knee and the rip in the velvet, there,” he pointed to the front of Gilbert’s jacket, “I don’t see that it’s so bad.”

“Luke,” Gilbert shook his head. “I can’t let her see me like this. I need to hide until she’s gone past. Which, fortunately, I think she has. Yes?”

Luke glanced down the path. The young lady and her chaperone had passed down the path and were heading back towards the trees by the main entrance. He nodded.

“Yes, they are. You can come out, I suppose.”

“Whew,” Gilbert said. He stepped out of the bushes, dusting off his coat. “Thank you, Luke. You look well-dressed,” he added, glancing at Luke’s black velvet suit, which was his smartest day-suit. “I wish I’d had the sense to wear something more respectable.” He shook his head sadly.

“Well, it looks like you got away with it,” Luke said with a smile. It was good to see Gilbert. His friend always lifted his spirits. “Have you dined at the coffee-house?”

“Not yet,” Gilbert said. “I was on my way there and then I spotted Amelia. I didn’t dare come out until she’d gone past. Care to join me?” he asked, gesturing to the path.

“I can’t,” Luke said, shrugging. “I need to get back to the shop. I just dined,” he added, “but you’re welcome to join me at the shop. Maybe

we can purchase some buns at the bakery."

"Now, there's a thought!" Gilbert nodded, falling into step with him as they walked. "I could do with your company, old chap. I am invited to a party this evening and I need to crystallize some ideas for my poems. You always help me think." He made a gesture towards Luke, who looked warmly at him.

"Thank you," he said. He was glad Gilbert would be there with him in the shop for a while. He could do with company too. He didn't want his mind dwelling on the events of the afternoon. He was sure there was some logical reason why Lady Sophia hadn't been there, and he wasn't going to let himself worry about it.

They stopped at the bakery and Gilbert insisted on buying Bath buns, though Luke assured him he couldn't possibly eat a whole one by himself.

"I'll finish it, Luke, no fear." Gilbert grinned. His tall, lanky form seemed able to consume infinite amounts without becoming any less lanky. Luke chuckled.

"I'm sure there'll be plenty left over for you." He eyed the sticky confection with discomfort. The pie already sat uneasily in his stomach and he wasn't sure if the raisin-filled, iced bun would make him feel better or worse.

"Grand!" Gilbert replied. "Ah, here we are. Now, how's business, Luke?" Gilbert asked, waiting as Luke opened the shop door. Luke unlocked it and Gilbert followed him in. The shop felt a bit warm and Luke opened the curtains and the window for a moment. Gilbert took a big bite of his iced bun.

“Not bad,” Luke admitted. “Business, I mean.” He set his Bath bun down on the corner of the table. Gilbert slid into the chair opposite him, making himself comfortable. The other day Luke had sold three copies of Robert Southey’s works. He felt confident that he could afford a new suit at least. He wasn’t sure if he’d bother, though – he never got invited to parties.

“Splendid.” Gilbert stretched his long legs out under the desk, making Luke move further back in his chair. He took a mouthful of his bun while Gilbert talked on. “Luke…you wouldn’t like to come with me? To this party, I mean?” he asked, taking another bite of the food.

“This evening?” Luke shrugged. “No idea. I don’t really want to go anywhere, Gilbert.”

“Too tired?” Gilbert asked, swallowing.

“No,” Luke frowned. “Just, well…uneasy. I don’t know, Gilbert. There’s a young lady, and she, well…she’s being strange.”

“Luke!” Gilbert grinned. “I’m so delighted. If only I knew Amelia well enough to say whether or not she was being strange or not. It would be nice.” He crossed his legs at the ankles, taking a big bite from the bun. It was almost finished, Luke noted, despite being the size of one of the larger books on the display-table. “But tell me about what happened, Luke.”

“Well, she is being a bit strange,” Luke said softly. “I think I’m being foolish, though…she was meant to meet me at the inn and she wasn’t

there." He looked on the desk, trying to hide his distress.

Gilbert finished chewing. "Luke…there could be so many reasons. Has she got some fire-breather of a governess? Someone who might keep her away from you?"

"No," Luke said, frowning. "She's definitely old enough not to have a governess. And there's nobody who'd try to keep her at home…At least, I don't think so." He trailed off. She might not have a fire-breather of a governess here, but she certainly had something of the sort at home - only it was her mother, from what little she had revealed to him. He knew so little! He looked out of the window, feeling distressed.

She tells me so little, really.

He had only known her for a few days, but he had thought she and he could speak to one another frankly. Now he felt as though she hadn't really told him much.

"Well, consider it, Luke," Gilbert said firmly. "And do try to come tonight! I reckon you could do with some entertainment. Not that Lord Walceaster's parties are exactly a scintillating diversion. But we can have a chat about poetry and he has a nice view over London. And the cook is excellent!" he enthused. He was wiping the icing off his fingers with his handkerchief, already finished.

Luke grinned, "Well, the thought of a dinner that my cook hasn't prepared is nice, I must say."

“Nice?” Gilbert laughed. “Like being let out of a dungeon, more like!”

They were both laughing when Gilbert took his leave. Luke agreed to accompany him to the party, but only if they both got ready at his lodgings, which were closer. Gilbert was free to borrow any of his suits that fitted. Gilbert laughed, sketching a bow.

“I shall return promptly at six of the clock,” he said. “And I’ll be sure to dress splendidly tonight. I don’t want to have to hide behind the curtain if Amelia comes.”

Luke chuckled. He raised his hand in a wave. “I’ll see you this evening, Gilbert,” he said.

He leaned back in his chair as the door shut. It was going to be a long afternoon and he knew his mind would return again and again to Lady Sophia. He wished Gilbert could have stayed a little longer, distracting him.

He made a few sales that afternoon and went home at five o’ clock. He walked down the street, collar turned up against the cold breeze, and around the corner past the railings around the park, on down the narrow, cobbled street where the house stood.

“Good evening, Sir,” the butler greeted. Luke nodded.

“Evening. I’m going to go out for dinner tonight. Lord Mainsborough is going to come here in a moment or two. Is Kenley about?”

“He’s making a fire in your room, My Lord.”

“I’ll go up directly.”He found the room unoccupied, the sole evidence of Kenley’s labour being a bucket by the mantelpiece and the fire-irons left out on the hearth-rug. Luke washed his face in the bowl of water on the table, regarding himself in the lookingglass critically.

“What does she see in you, anyway?” he murmured to himself. He thought he was not badlooking, with his narrow face, dark eyes and thick dark hair. But he was sure there were many fellows in London who were as handsome, and of those, most of them had more to offer her than he ever would.

He reached for a flannel and dried off his face. The street was darkening outside, the pale daylight falling between clouds to touch the cobbles. Luke watched people walking up and down the street, going about their business blindly; hurrying here and there. He felt deep sadness well up inside him, a sense of aimlessness about it all. He had something so precious in his life – his meetings with Lady Sophia. And now, without them, his world seemed a blur of endless cloudy days, of rushing back and forth down streets with no point to it.

“Dash it, Luke,” he told himself firmly. “Stop being so foolish.”

He combed his hair and rang the bell, summoning Kenley.

“Sir! Apologies, Sir…I was just out to get more coal for the fire.” He gestured at the fireplace, where he had evidently stopped mid-way through some action.

“Of course.” Luke nodded. “Kenley, I’m going out this evening. If you could dust my suit and boots? And I will be joined by Lord Mainsborough, who will also be getting ready here, if you could assist him?”

“Of course, My Lord,” Kenley replied. “I’ll wipe the soot off my hands and start straight away.”

“Good,” Luke said thinly, watching the fellow dust his hands off cursorily with a handkerchief. Luke sighed to himself. How could he bring Lady Sophia anywhere near this place? She would die of fright if she saw any of his servants and the free-and-easy way they kept house.

“Luke!” somebody shouted from the stairwell. “Are you up there? Let’s get ready.”

Luke grinned to himself as Kenley looked up, confused.

“Lord Mainsborough, Sir,” the butler said, hurrying to keep up with Gilbert, who let himself in, grinning at Luke from the doorway.

“I see it is.” Luke nodded, dismissing the butler politely. “Gilbert! You’re just on time. I found some suits that might fit you,” he said, gesturing to two suits he’d just taken from the cupboard.

“Grand! Let’s see, then. Oh, yes! I do like this one. I hope the trousers don’t end too far from my ankles.”

Luke laughed as Gilbert started undressing himself and trying on the suit. The suit fitted him; the shorter legs of the trousers concealed in knee-length boots. Luke had to smile. His friend looked quite elegant.

He hoped Amelia would be there.

The two of them, dressed and ready for the party, went down the steps and out to the street below. Luke found himself feeling a little better, though he still wished he knew what had happened that afternoon.

Chapter 19

“Come on, Sophia,” Lettie said with a smile. “You *know* you need to get out into society.” She shook her pale curls reproachfully. The daylight from the window behind her fell on her shoulders.

Sophia shook her head. “I can’t, you know that. I’m still in mourning.”

Sophia was sitting in the drawing-room, her embroidery on her lap. It was morning, the smell of pastries from breakfast still lingering in the air. She looked across at Lettie, who had called unexpectedly at the townhouse. She had just been passing when she’d seen the coach stop with the Westford Arms on the doors, and had decided at once to make an inquiry to discover if Sophia was in town.

“Well, I know, yes,” Lettie said, drawing Sophia back to the moment. But that doesn’t put a ban on teatime! You really could come to the house and take tea with us.”

“I could, yes,” Sophia said uncertainly. She looked across at Lettie. Her friend was wearing a yellow dress, her pale hair in bunched ringlets. She could have been sixteen, not twenty, judging from her appearance, but often she was wiser than her years. She was one of Sophia’s best friends. It had been reassuring to see her.

“Consider it, at least,” Lettie persuaded.

Sophia smiled at her a little sadly. “It’s so kind to ask me, Lettie. I’m just not sure.”

“Well, think about it. You’re welcome this afternoon. In fact, I rather insist,” Lettie added firmly.

Sophia shook her head sadly. She had spent the morning in the house, focusing on all the accomplishments she was supposed to exercise regularly. She had neglected them in the last week and she felt guilty about it. She felt too guilty to go out. She also had no idea what she was going to do that afternoon and if she could in good conscience visit the bookshop again.

“You can,” Lettie said gently, drawing her attention back to teatime. “You know where Oldham Place is. You can come and visit anytime you wish. I wish I could insist on your coming back with me.” She shrugged her shoulders, making the loose sleeves of her gown ruffle briefly.

“I could,” Sophia said slowly.

The more she thought about it, the more it made sense. If she went to Lettie’s home to visit, she could excuse herself both from Mr. Beaumont and her mother. She could tell her mama that she had called on Lettie, which was why she had not seen Lord Cull that day, and she could tell Mr. Beaumont of the teatime, too. It was a way out of all her other obligations.

“Fine!” Lettie grinned, clapping her hands. “Then when the coach comes to fetch me in an hour, I will insist we go back together. You know my parents will be delighted to see you.”

“Thank you.”

Lord Oldham had been a friend of both her parents, and Lady Oldham was a dear woman – kind and warm. Sophia felt a little guilty that in many ways she felt more comfortable at Oldham Place than she did at her home. She found herself looking forward to the plan.

They left together after an hour. Sophia followed Lettie down the stairs, shrugging on her cloak as they went. It was cool outside, and she slipped on a pair of gloves as well – grey and soft, warming her fingers.

“This is diverting,” Lettie said with a grin, as they set off. “Wait until Mama and Papa see you! They’ll be so surprised. You are always welcome to stay with us, you know.”

“Thank you,” Sophia said, a touch awkwardly. She knew she couldn’t stay. How would she complete the quest? As it was, she could barely explain why she had come to London without her mother – telling her friend had been somewhat difficult. She had said it was in connection to the will, and left it there.

I don’t even know if I should be completing this quest.

The thought of not doing as her father asked was deeply shocking to her, but still she felt that it was wrong to do his wishes when her entire family, still living, would disapprove so strongly.

The coach rolled up to Oldham House. It was a pale sandstone building, set slightly back from a narrow road, with trees just visible

over the front wall. It was built in the newer part of town, unlike Westford Heights, which was in the heart of the city and had no room for gardens.

"Mama!" Lettie greeted her mother excitedly as they walked up the stairs at Oldham Place. The house was large and comfortable – more recently built than Westford Heights, with a sunny atmosphere that made the place seem cosy even on a cold morning. "Look who is here in London! Isn't it wonderful?"

"Lettie! Oh! Sophia!" Lady Oldham greeted Sophia with a gentle smile. "You're in London!"

"Yes," Sophia said shyly as she shrugged out of her cloak. Lady Oldham had a soft face, curly pale hair and wide eyes in striking turquoise. She gestured to Lettie.

"Lettie? Will you girls take tea in the drawing-room? Sophia, it's lovely to see you. I am so sorry for your loss." She looked down, sadly.

"Thank you," Sophia said, eyes closing for a moment. She wished she could just forget, but every day something new reminded her of her father. Here, at Oldham Place, she at least had few memories of him.

"Your father was a dear friend. You must miss him terribly."

"I do," Sophia whispered. She looked up at the ceiling, not wanting to cry. She was glad Lady Oldham understood how close they had been. She wished she could talk to her; seek her counsel on the matter of this strange quest.

“Can we take tea in my boudoir?” Lettie asked brightly, interrupting them. “Sophia and I have so much to talk of!”

“Of course you may,” Lady Oldham said. She gave them both a gentle smile.

“Good! We’ll be down by lunchtime,” Lettie said, smiling at her mother fondly.

Sophia followed Lettie up the stairs to her room, hurrying as her friend ran up to her chambers. Lettie opened the door next to her bedroom, leading Sophia behind her. She took a breath in. The boudoir was decorated with flocked silk wallpaper, the fire burning warmly in the grate, the air scented with lavender. Sophia leaned back in a richly upholstered chair and sipped tea thoughtfully as soon as the maid brought it.

“So,” Lettie said with a smile, as she reached for the milk-jug for her tea, “a pity you can’t go to a ball! It would be so diverting. I have such a fine group of friends here, and now that you’re here as well – my best friend – it seems a pity not to go.” Her rosebud of a mouth turned down in a moue of disapproval.

“It is,” Sophia agreed. Not that she was in the mood, really, for attending a ball – her heart would not be in it, and the chance of bumping into Lord Cull was terrifying. But the thought of being surrounded by friends was appealing.

“It would be so *diverting*!” Lettie said again. “I wanted you to meet

Culver."

"Culver?"

"I met him at a ball – the first of the season. He's a baron. Mama said if he wants to court me I have permission." She went red.

"Oh!" Sophia grinned. Now she was curious. She felt a pang in her own heart. If only her own situation was so simple! If Mr. Beaumont had just decided to follow convention, it would be better.

But then, if he had followed convention, would he be himself?

The trait she liked the best about him was his self-assurance. She tucked the thought at the back of her mind and focused on Lettie, who grinned.

"This Lord Culver," Sophia asked slowly. "What does he look like?"

"Oh!" Lettie smiled. "He's a good foot taller than me – maybe a little more, we waltzed a few times but it's *so* difficult to judge height, really – and he has blonde hair and the most beautiful greenish eyes you ever saw. Oh! He's so handsome!" she declared.

Sophia was happy for her. She loved seeing Lettie so excited. Now she was determined to see this young fellow for herself. She knew Lettie would love to show her – clearly Culver's attributes were something her friend could discuss endlessly.

“He sounds quite stunning,” Sophia answered.

“He is! Oh, Sophia…I declare! I am starting to fall in love with him. It’s so wonderful.”

“It is,” Sophia agreed. A small part of her wished she could talk of Mr. Beaumont without feeling as if she had committed some terrible crime against Mama.

“I can’t wait for you to see him. But you can’t come to the ball. That’s tricky.” Lettie put her head on one side, thinking.

“No. Not really,” Sophia agreed sadly. She would have liked to – curiosity was starting to outweigh her sadness. But the rules of convention were clear – no balls for another three months.

“I know what! I am inviting some guests to tea today – just one or two friends. And maybe we could ask Mama if we could host a little salon here tomorrow. I could invite you. And Culver, of course.” Lettie had gone pink, Sophia noticed, just contemplating the suggestion.

“How many guests would there be?” Sophia asked. She was already feeling positive about the idea, but she needed to know, since she could attend small gatherings but not large. She had already spent one month in full mourning and her social activities were slowly allowed to re-start. She frowned at Lettie, who seemed pleased.

“Maybe eight? Including us, Mama and Papa. Would that be possible?”

“Yes,” Sophia agreed. There was no reason why she shouldn’t attend a small, intimate gathering. Her mother would actually be pleased, she thought – she was making herself known in London society.

“Well, then!” Lettie said, clapping her hands together. “That’s settled! Now, I think I shall wear my cream-colored gown. It’s new. I can’t wait to try it! And you?” she asked, frowning. “What will you wear?”

“I have a nice blue dress – dark, like this one, but with a prettier neckline,” Sophia said.

“Splendid!” Lettie giggled. “That’s settled. You will stay for luncheon, won’t you? We can ask Mama and Papa then.” She was already going to fetch the dress, and paused in the doorway.

Sophia tensed, but nodded. “I think that is a fine idea,” she said.

She would stay here all day. She knew Mr. Beaumont would be expecting her, but she couldn’t. She hadn’t straightened out her thoughts she wasn’t going to risk doing anything – either with the quest or about the Marquess.

When they were dressed for luncheon – Sophia had no other dress to wear, but Lettie’s maid helped her arrange her hair in a chignon – they went downstairs. Sophia was surprised to see there were other guests there. She tensed in the doorway, feeling nervous. She’d been unable to socialize for almost two months, and she suddenly found

herself feeling shy. Lettie took her hand.

"Sophia! Come and meet my friends. This is Lady Adeline, and Lady Amelia. Adeline, Amelia…this is Lady Sophia. We've known each other since before our coming out!" she added, grinning.

Sophia curtsied quickly. She looked up at the two girls. Adeline had red hair and seemed quiet, her gown cream and plain-cut; while Amelia was pale haired with hazel eyes and she instantly felt warmth towards her as the girl curtseyed low.

"Pleased to meet you," she said.

"I am pleased to meet you too," Sophia agreed. Amelia grinned and Adeline smiled shyly.

"Now, then," Lettie said when they were all seated. The four young women sat opposite each other at the centre of the table, while Lord and Lady Oldham took the ends. "I wanted to ask you – Mama, Papa – if we could host a party here? Nothing big. Just myself, all of us present and one or two others?" she looked at them appealingly.

Lord Oldham nodded. "Of course, Lettie. No longer than two hours, mind…I do like my sleep."

Lettie looked at her mother fondly. "Of course," she agreed. "Oh, isn't this fun! I shall write out invitations, and everything. We could make a proper little evening party."

Sophia felt herself swept up with the happy mood, and found herself smiling. She was surprised, but she was looking forward to tomorrow.

Chapter 20

Luke sat at his desk in the bookshop. It was five o' clock. He felt a cold, leaden hardness in his chest. Lady Sophia had not come today, either. He had gone to take lunch at the inn, hoping that he would see her there, but she had not arrived. He had returned, hoping that perhaps there was some notice from her to be delivered, some word to explain what had caused her to miss two days in a row of their planned discussions.

Nothing had arrived.

The street was quiet, the day cloudy. It was almost time to leave, and there had been only a few customers. The fact just added to his low mood.

"I might as well go home," he said to himself.

He reached for his hat and coat and shrugged them on. Not even the party the previous evening had really cheered him. It had been fun, admittedly, to spend an evening with Gilbert, drinking and laughing, but the enjoyment had worn off as swiftly as it arrived, leaving him just as low as before.

He wanted to see Lady Sophia again, and talk to her.

"Dash it. You know it's better if you don't," he told himself firmly. He ought to have compassion, and know that it was best for her not to be seen with him. As it was, he might already have damaged her

reputation. He should care about her and know she was doing what was best by avoiding him.

"All the same, it's not right," he told himself as he turned to the door, ready to lock up. He had never felt like this about anyone – not since Claudia. He had turned his back on his family and his position and now a tiny part of him wished he hadn't and was even considering trying to reconcile with Epsom.

He was turning away from the door, struggling to push aside thoughts of a reconciliation with his brother, when someone shouted.

"Luke! There you are."

"Gilbert," Luke said, running a weary hand down his own forehead. "I ought to be used to you by now." He shook his head. "I nearly had a fit of apoplexy there."

His friend walked up out of the shadows and patted his shoulder.

"Sorry," Gilbert grinned, not seeming sorry. "I had to find you. I have a dilemma."

"What sort of dilemma?" Luke frowned. Gilbert always spoke plainly. It was unlike him to exaggerate an incident. If he said it was a dilemma, it was certainly something.

"Well, it's Amelia," Gilbert said, falling into step as they walked back

along the street. “You see, she invited me to a party. Nothing big, just a gathering at a friend’s home. And now I’m beside myself with nerves. I can’t go, Luke! But I need to take this chance. I might never have another moment to speak with her like this.”

“Yes, absolutely,” Luke said, nodding thoughtfully. “Well, you must go, but where do I come into this?”

Gilbert grinned shyly. “Luke, could you come too?”

Luke stared. “Gilbert…I don’t know. I mean, I’m not going to be much of an asset at a party. And besides…”

“You? Not much of an asset at a party?” Gilbert chuckled. “Luke! You’re one of the most-charming fellows I know. If you aren’t good at a party, you tell me who is. No, I shan’t have it. If that’s your only excuse, you’re not escaping.”

Luke laughed. He had to admit he felt better. “If you insist,” he said slowly. “But…”

“Luke, what?” Gilbert asked. They had stopped beside an alehouse, the light from the torches bright on Gilbert’s thin face. He looked intently at his friend; eyes narrowed. “Luke…if you are going to say that you are no lord, and that you don’t belong in high society, I won’t have it. You’re more lord than all the rest of them put together. Besides – all of this society nonsense is just tomfoolery. You know that!”

Luke felt his head sink forward wearily. “Yes, that is true,” he agreed.

“But Gilbert, find one other in Town who feels as we do, and I shall pay the fifty pounds I just spent on debt to you.”

Gilbert chuckled. “Maybe. But as it happens, I am sure many in Town feel as we. How many gentlemen go down to the races and sit and talk with jockeys and the gamblers of all walks of life? How many idolize prize-fighters, and jostle with each other to learn boxing?”

Luke laughed. He had to admit Gilbert was right. Most society men secretly wished they were professional boxers or sportsmen. And nobody cared about their circumstances.

“As you say,” he said. They walked back to Luke’s lodgings. “Very well. I’ll come with you. And maybe you can help me too. I have a letter to send.”

“A letter?” Gilbert raised a brow. “I shall post it anywhere in London or Kent!”

Luke grinned. “Not so onerous, my friend. All I need is taking it to Westford Heights.” He looked away.

The letter was only partly-written. He was struggling hard with it. How could he tell Sophia how he felt, how much she had come to mean to him in such a short time? He would try and finish it that night and send it in the morning.

“Fine,” Gilbert agreed. “I would be happy to deliver it personally. Now – shall we dine together? I can tell you about tomorrow evening, and mayhap you can help me decide what to wear and what to do, and…

well, everything in particular about the event. I am helpless."

Luke laughed. Gilbert was clearly in love with Amelia, and he would do anything to help further his pursuit of her. He was sure that, as soon as Amelia actually spoke with Gilbert, she would not be able to help but fall in love. He was a fascinating man.

"So," Luke said, as they went up the steps to his house, "I reckon you should wear that black suit you wore the other evening…it really looked well on you."

"Thank you." Gilbert flushed. "And you don't think my hair needs some changing?" He gestured at his chestnut hair, which was not long, but not ruthlessly short either. Luke shook his head.

"Not at all. It is quite stylish, actually. A nice cravat and some good silk stock, and you'll look really good."

"Thank you." Gilbert reddened. "And you? What're you wearing?"

Luke shrugged. "I don't suppose it matters, really. I'll just wear my blue suit." He walked in and took off his boots, nodding to the butler who had appeared in the hallway. "Lord Mainsborough will stay for dinner."

"Very good, Sir. I'll inform Cook."

Luke grinned as Gilbert tensed.

“You sure about this?” Gilbert asked, taking off his coat. “I mean, there’s still time to go to the inn…no need to trouble your cook…”

Luke laughed. “I shan’t let him poison you.”

“That’s very kind.”

They went up to the drawing-room. Luke shut the curtains and stoked the fireplace and Gilbert poured them drinks. Luke sat down, feeling fidgety and distracted. He needed to write the note for Sophia, but at the same time he didn’t want to think about it, or anything else. He had spent too long drowning in his thoughts of her.

“We’ll be leaving at five of the clock tomorrow,” Gilbert informed him. “The party is a little further out of town…We might need to take a coach.”

“Grand,” Luke nodded. “Shall we get ready here?”

“I’d like to,” Gilbert agreed. “And then you can give me that note to deliver. Sounds fair.”

“Yes,” Luke nodded. “It seems fair.”

He found that he was looking forward to tomorrow.

Chapter 21

“You are sure about this?” Sophia asked. She was standing in front of the mirror at Lettie’s house, frowning at her reflection. The blue dress she had chosen was one she hadn’t worn before – an evening gown that had a daringly low-cut neck. It was navy blue, and the sleeves were barest puffs, the skirt long and decorated at the waist with a darker border, almost black. Her hair looked glossily dark against the midnight blue.

“I am completely so!” Lettie declared. She was wearing a yellow dress, her hair arranged in tight curls. She wore pearls, while Sophia had no jewellery on. “You look so stunning! I like the simpler hairstyle, too,” she gestured.

“Thank you,” Sophia said softly. Her hair – long and lustrous – was caught in a simple bun that let most of it drape softly onto her shoulders. Again, it only had a black pin to hold it in place, all ornaments being banned during mourning.

“The colour is surprisingly lovely. It brings out your green eyes.” Lettie studied her.

“Well, you look beautiful,” Sophia assured her friend. Her blue eyes were striking against the yellow gown, and her lovely hair was playful and youthful-looking.

“I hope so! I hope Culver agrees.”

Sophia said nothing, but gave her friend a warm look.

“Girls? Are you ready?” Lady Oldham called. Lettie giggled.

“Yes, Mama! Give us a moment. Sophia…is my scarf there?” she asked, gesturing at the bed by the mirror.

“Yes,” Sophia agreed, passing her a light scarf of thin muslin. Lettie wrapped it around her shoulders.

“Ready!” she declared. “Let’s go down! We’ll start in the dining-room. After dinner, we’ll move up to the drawing-room. I want to show off my piano skills a bit. Or, maybe, you play and I’ll sing! My voice is much better than my sightreading.” She laughed.

“Well, that sounds fair,” Sophia agreed.

They both giggled and then hurried down the stairs. Sophia was surprised to feel a knot of excitement in her stomach. It was her first party since going into mourning. And it was her very first without the critical eye of Mama. She felt confident.

“Girls! There you are,” Lady Oldham said. “Now, we have a few moments before the guests arrived. We invited eight people – you’re sure that will be all right for you, now, though?” she asked Sophia gently.

“Yes.”

Eight people was still a small gathering, and it was a supper party, not a ball. It was quite acceptable for this stage of mourning. Sophia swallowed hard. She felt a tingling mix of nerves and anticipation.

"Here! You sit here," Lettie said, gesturing her to the right of the table. It was decorated with candles in silver candelabras. The places were all laid with linen napkins. Sophia blinked in the sparkling mix of candlelight and looked across at Lettie, who was fidgeting with nerves.

"Girls…will you come and greet the guests?" Lady Oldham called from the entrance. "Mr. Herding said that there were coaches in the drive."

"Oh!" Lettie jumped up. "How do I look? Is my hair in place?" She turned to Sophia. "Really…this dress is alright, isn't it?"

"Yes," Sophia assured her. "I assure you, it's all beautiful."

"Good! Oh, you're so lovely," Lettie squeezed her hand. They fell into place beside her mother, waiting to greet the guests as they arrived.

Sophia curtseyed as Lady Adeline walked shyly in, followed shortly by Lady Amelia, who looked very pretty in a blue dress. She wondered who the other guests would be. More young ladies followed, and then she felt Lettie tense beside her.

“It’s him! Oh, Sophia…how do I look?” Lettie looked at her, wide-eyed. Her breath was heaving and Sophia hoped she was all right. She gave her a friendly look.

“You look lovely. Here he comes.”

A tall man walked in and bowed the moment he spotted Lettie. He looked up at her, hazel eyes bright.

“My Lady. It is an honour,” he said. He kissed her hand. Sophia heard Lettie gasp.

“Lord Culver. Be welcome,” she murmured. She dropped a low curtsey and Sophia could feel the heat of her blushing. She turned to Lettie and grinned as soon as he’d moved through to the dining-room.

“He’s so handsome,” she whispered.

“He is!” Lettie said, cheeks red. “Oh, Lettie! Isn’t he so grand?”

Sophia just looked at her fondly. She loved seeing Lettie so happy. She felt a twist of sorrow that her own love – which was as warm and sparkling – must be secret. She looked up as another guest came in.

Two men walked behind the last lady to arrive – one very tall, another slightly less so. Sophia frowned. The man looked fleetingly familiar, but then she was only seeing his shadow, she told herself, and so she couldn’t rightly tell how he looked. She frowned, peering into the

dark.

“Good evening,” the tall gentleman said, stepping through the doorway first. “Gilbert. Lord Mainsborough.” He bowed low, the candlelight catching his red hair.

Sophia curtseyed, and straightened up. She stopped breathing. She was looking into dark eyes.

“Good evening,” Lettie greeted the man, turning to stare at Sophia. Sophia barely noticed. She dropped into a curtsey, knees shaking.

“Good evening, Mr. Beaumont.”

He bowed low. When he straightened, his eyes returned to hers. He looked as astonished as she. Both of them stared at each other. The sound of talking from the dining-room had faded, the laughter suddenly out of earshot. All Sophia could see was his face, her world narrowed to the depths of his eyes.

Beside her, Lettie chuckled. “Sir? Will you step inside?”

“Oh. Yes.” He bowed low, but when he straightened up, he turned back to look at Sophia again. His eyes were on hers, depths full of wonder and confoundment.

Sophia looked back, speechless. All she could hear was the sound of her breath and heartbeat.

“Well! What was *that*?” Lettie giggled, as soon as the two young men were in the dining-room.

“I’m not sure,” Sophia whispered. She didn’t want to tell Lettie anything yet. Beside her, Lady Oldham said nothing. Sophia sensed that she had noticed, and understood the looks that had passed between them. If she had, she had said nothing, for which Sophia was grateful.

“Well, is that everyone?” Lettie asked, instantly back on another topic. “Mama? Shall we go to the diningroom?”

“Yes,” Lady Oldham said. “That is everyone. Amelia did say she’d taken the liberty to invite a guest. But I don’t know the other gentleman?” Her blue eyes seemed troubled.

“It’s only a dinner-party, Mama. And Papa and yourself are here, so we’ll be quite safe,” Lettie said reassuringly. “It doesn’t really matter who he is, does it?”

“No,” Lady Oldham said thoughtfully. “I suppose not.”

Sophia felt her face flood with warmth. Mr. Beaumont was here! She was almost too shy to go into the diningroom. She followed Lettie, walking between her friend and Lady Oldham. When they reached the room, the guests were all standing about, the butler distributing drinks from a tray. Mr. Beaumont was in the corner, a glass in his hand. He was talking to the tall man, who was focused on Amelia.

“A drink, My Lady?” the butler asked. Sophia nodded, taking blackcurrant cordial. She wanted to think clearly. She stood beside Lettie, who was giggling with Adeline and Lord Culver. Sophia’s eyes strayed to the corner, where Mr. Beaumont stood. After a long hesitation, she took a deep breath and walked over to join them.

“My Lady,” Gilbert said. He bowed low, almost spilling his drink. He straightened up again, and Amelia grinned.

“Good evening, My Lord,” she replied. She dropped a brief curtsey. She stared up. Mr. Beaumont stared back.

“My Lady,” he murmured. “I…had not thought to see you.”

“No,” Sophia replied. She could barely think. It felt as if some great force was inside her, straining in her heart, struggling to find freedom in her words. She looked away, trying to gather herself. “I was surprised to attend, too.” She glanced at her dress. It was still a mourning shade.

“You visit here often?” Mr. Beaumont asked.

Sophia shrugged. “Lettie is a close friend. I had not known she was in London this season. We met two days ago.”

“I see,” Mr. Beaumont said. His eyes held questions, and hurt, and surprise.

Sophia took a breath. They were standing by the fire, the rest of the guests seeming far away. She didn't know what to say, but suddenly on seeing him again her feelings were clear and she knew what she wished to do.

"I'm sorry," she said.

He frowned; eyes gentle. "Why, My Lady?" he asked. His voice was soft and caring. "You have no need. Your time is yours, to apportion as you desire."

"Yes," Sophia said, and suddenly she knew exactly what she felt. "Yes, it is. And that is why I shall be calling on you in the bookshop, at ten of the clock tomorrow. My time is my own – who knows how long I have in this mortal world? I would spend it meaningfully."

Mr. Beaumont stared. He smiled, and the corner of his lip lifted. "Let us straighten and let free the arrow," he said.

She felt tears spring to her eyes. The words of the poem! Yes. She finally felt as if she understood them.

"Yes," she said, looking up to stop the tears. "Yes. Too long have I been at home, scared like mice." She wanted to laugh, but the tears were falling. She turned away from the guests, her joy mingling with sorrow and astonishment.

Mr. Beaumont looked at her intently. He shook his head. "No, My

Lady. I cannot let you say that. You have never been afraid. In some ways, you have been too brave." His look was firm, with those dark eyes.

"But I *did* lack courage," she said, blowing her nose on her handkerchief. "I had not the courage to do as you suggest – to spend my time as I desire." She put her handkerchief back in her purse, fumbling a little with the string.

He chuckled. "It took me twenty-two years to find that courage, My Lady. I can only admire you for finding it sooner."

"Two years sooner, only," she said, sniffing. She smiled at him. "And not alone."

"We are never alone," Mr. Beaumont said firmly.

"No," Sophia agreed. She felt her eyes flood again. Her father was somewhere, she was sure of it. Somewhere, he stood on the edge of life like the candle she could see out of one corner of her eye, smiling.

They walked towards the dinner-table as Lady Oldham called them.

"Dinner is ready!" she said warmly. "Come and sit down, everyone."

Sophia slipped into her place opposite Lettie. She tensed as Mr. Beaumont took the place beside her. She had never sat so close to him, even in the bookshop. Her heart thumped. He looked over at her

with a friendly look, eyes questioning.

“I trust I do not impose?”

“No,” Sophia whispered.

They shared a smile as the butler moved soundlessly about the table, setting dishes before each guest. Sophia felt her stomach grumble at the delicious smells. Mr. Beaumont looked up, amused.

“I haven’t seen such fine food in ages,” he whispered to her.

They both laughed, the sound warm in the genteel conversation of the room. Lettie was sitting across from her, eyes fixed on Lord Culver, who had taken the place beside her. Sophia felt her stomach tingle with warmth.

The dinner proceeded quickly, and they talked lightly during each of the courses. Sophia had to allow that the food was excellent – each dish was delicious, especially the dessert, which was a trifle. She dabbed the cream from her lips and found herself looking up at Mr. Beaumont.

“You enjoyed the meal?” he asked gently.

“Yes,” she murmured. His eyes were gentle as he leaned forward and, delicately, wiped cream from her cheek. She blushed red. His fingers touched her so lightly, yet fire spread through her body. She looked

away, shyly.

“Thank you,” she murmured.

“Thank you,” he said.

She felt her heart catch alight. He looked away and she looked down at her plate, feeling unsure of what to say. There were so many words inside her, but she couldn’t think of which to speak. She glanced down the table, where the others were standing to leave.

“My Lady,” Mr. Beaumont murmured, as they stood to join the guests moving to the drawing-room, “I am pleased to have dined with you.”

“And I am with you, Mr. Beaumont.”

“Luke,” he corrected softly. They stood at the end of the hallway. The other guests had either gone to the drawing-room or were outside, in the garden. He looked into her eyes and Sophia felt her breath stop.

“Luke,” she murmured. She flushed red as she looked into his eyes, his name sweet as cherries on her lips.

“Yes,” he said. His voice was gentle, and he was really standing very close to her. She tensed as he took her hand tenderly in his. His fingertips brushed her skin. She shut her eyes a moment, the touch delicious and warm. When she looked up, he smiled tenderly.

“I am so pleased to see you here.”

“And I am pleased to see you,” Sophia said. She had never meant anything so much.

He looked at her fondly and she looked back with warmth and gentleness. Together, slowly, they walked back along the hallway to the drawing-room.

Chapter 22

Luke sat in his room. The fire was burning low in the grate, the sound of it warm and soothing as the ashes shifted under coal. Somewhere, Gilbert was asleep. He had taken the coach back with Luke and decided it was too late to go back to his house. Luke could hear the rise and fall of his breath from the drawing-room.

Luke couldn't sleep.

Whenever gave himself a moment to think, images flooded his mind. Sophia, seated at the piano, her lovely face flushed. Her skin was like china, and her dark gown offset her pale neck and shoulders, making him long to press his lips against them.

"Luke, stop it," he told himself. He grinned. He needed sleep.

He shrugged the nightgown closer around himself and stood up. The fire had burned down and he stoked it, then got into bed. He recalled Sophia smiling at him, those green eyes so full of affection.

"Go to sleep," he told himself, a smile lifting his face.

He rolled up in the blanket and curled up, trying to find rest. As he recalled the duet Sophia had played, her long hair flowing loose over her shoulders, the red highlights showing up against the dark blue of her gown, he slowly fell asleep.

“Morning,” Gilbert called out. He was sitting at the big table in the drawing-room, his hair a little wild from lack of brushing but otherwise perfectly composed, wearing full dinner dress and leaning back from the table, a plate of eggs before him.

“Morning, Gilbert,” Luke replied. He slipped into the room and sat down beside Gilbert, reaching across for tea. He was still drifting in a haze of memory.

“I could eat ten eggs this morning,” Gilbert replied, “and still have room for half a loaf.” He reached across for the bread.

Luke raised a brow. “Well, if my cook has ten eggs that aren’t going off, you’re welcome to them. Enjoyed yourself?”

Gilbert grinned, dabbing egg off his chin. “A wonderful night. Amelia mentioned a party at her own parents’ manor. I can’t imagine a better sign than that!” he sounded happy.

Luke inclined his head. He had seen how well Gilbert and Amelia liked each other. He felt pleased for his friend.

“You?” Gilbert asked, sawing a slice off the loaf. “Had a good evening, I think?”

“Yes,” Luke said. He could hear how dreamy his own voice sounded, and he didn’t mind in the least. He was in love, and not about to hide it.

“Sounds like it,” Gilbert chuckled. “She is beautiful,” he added wistfully.

“She is,” Luke agreed. He recalled her again, with her hair loose about her shoulders, her eyes focused on the music as she played. He would give anything to spend time alone with her, to have a chance to kiss those sweet lips. He glanced at the clock.

“Oh, heck. Gilbert…is it eight of the clock already?”

“My watch says a little less,” Gilbert said, shrugging. “We have plenty of time to get to the shop, Luke, never fear.”

“I hope so,” Luke said, dabbing at his lips. He took a piece of bread and ate hastily, feeling the need to be quick. He wanted to at least dress properly before getting to the bookshop. He was sure Gilbert fully intended to stay in his eveningsuit all day – if ever someone existed who didn’t care about custom or duty, it was him.

“Of course we have,” Gilbert reassured him. “We can even get a Gazette on the way. Wouldn’t want to miss out on the news, eh?”

Luke nodded, and hastily gulped down some tea.

After what felt like an age, they arrived at the bookshop. Luke checked his cravat again as they unlocked the door and went in. He had tried a new knot and he thought it looked good, but he wanted to be sure. He turned to Gilbert, who sauntered in, a gazette under his

arm.

“You’ll return home tonight?” he asked.

Gilbert shrugged. He was still in the black evening suit, leaning against the shelf. “I reckon I should go back,” he said. “I could do with your company, though. We could take dinner at the Tatfield?”

“Good idea,” Luke replied. “A second night liberated from my cook.”

They both laughed, though Luke felt somewhat nervous. When Gilbert had gone, he took a deep breath.

“Still have plenty of time before ten,” he told himself. It was only nine o’ clock. He glanced at himself in the window then sat down behind his desk, sorting the accounts and the books on the table; a nervous habit.

“Mr. Beaumont?”

“Yes?” Luke shot up out of the desk to see Jane coming into the shop. Behind her was Sophia. She looked fondly at him and his heart stopped.

“Luke,” she said softly.

“Sophia.”

They looked at each other. Luke felt as if the world had stopped and it was only them, all London silent and emptied but for those eyes that stared at him. Out of the corner of his own eye he caught a movement to see that Jane had stationed herself in a chair by the window, seemingly unaware of them. Sophia blushed, stepping back a little, the smile still stretching her soft lips. He ached to kiss them.

“Shall we discuss that poem?” Sophia asked.

He grinned, blushing. “Yes. Though I suspect we have completed that task?”

Sophia lifted a brow. “I suspect so.”

They shared a grin. She turned to the desk and he hastened to it, blushing as she sat down prettily opposite. She placed the book on the table, a pale finger resting on the page of poetry. Together, they murmured the words.

When they had finished, they looked at each other.

“I think we arrived at the meaning last night.” His voice was low.

“Yes,” Sophia whispered. He thought she looked different. Where before she had seemed tense and hesitant, now she blossomed like a flower in spring. He could sense that those words must have meant

something deep to her.

“Well, then,” he said. His voice was tight. She looked so beautiful that he could barely get words out. She wore a brown dress the colour of coffee with a square neckline, and he could not stop staring. “Shall we see what the next clue is?”

“Of course,” Sophia said softly.

They turned the page.

Sophia read the clue first, and frowned.

“What is it?” Luke asked.

She turned the page to face him. There was just one word. “Talk?” he frowned.

“That’s what it says,” Sophia said with a chuckle. She frowned; one brow raised. “What do you think it means?”

Luke shrugged. “Not sure. But I suppose there’s no harm in taking it to be literal. Shall we see if there’s another clue?”

Sophia grinned. “I like the literal interpretation. But look…he’s also underlined some letters on this page. Shall we write them down and

see what words they make?"

"Yes," Luke responded. He watched her as she read the letters out, taking the pen she passed him.

"T," she read first. "Then H. Then E…Can you write them? I'll read. It's faster that way."

"Certainly," he said. He took the pen from her fingers. His own brushed against them and he drew in a breath, the touch tingling across his skin.

"T, then H, then E," he read out. "Then N. Then there's a letter T again…"

They read out the letters, and Sophia frowned, reading out the long list. "Thenturnto…" she read. "Oh! I see!" she was laughing again. He delighted to see her smiling. "What does it say?"

"Then turn to page forty-five."

They both started laughing. Luke felt his heart fill with warmth. "Your father was unique."

"He was," Sophia murmured. He saw her eyes dampen with tears. He wished he hadn't reminded her of her sadness, and hastened to find a handkerchief. He passed his to her.

“My apologies,” he said, placing the handkerchief in her fingers gently.

“No,” Sophia said, smiling. Her tears streaked her cheeks, but she beamed at him through them. “I am happy. I want to remember him. This is the first time I’ve really cried.” She sniffed, “I mean, in a way that is not simply too painful to do.”

Luke knew what she meant. He had cried for Claudia like that. He still didn’t know what had happened, but he suspected she had passed and he had only finally mourned for her this year. “I understand,” he said.

Sophia took a breath in. “Thank you,” she said softly. She dabbed at her eyes. Luke looked at her warmly.

“You have nothing to thank me for,” he said gently.

They sat together and she rested her hand on the table, her fingers close to his own. He moved fractionally, so that his hand and hers touched. She didn’t move.

“I’m sorry if we’re disturbing your shop,” Sophia said, when the silence had stretched on for what felt like an age. It must really only have been a minute. The room was quiet, even the voices from the far-off street sounding hushed and distant.

“Not at all,” Luke grinned. “I wish it was always so populous! I don’t expect more than two or three customers a day. Even when a poet has

a new book published, we don't get too many people in here."

Sophia giggled. "I'm sure there must be ever so many people scrambling for some new books, though."

"Sometimes," Luke shrugged. "Not the most prosperous business. But I like it."

"How did you come to sell books?" Sophia asked. "I don't think I ever asked you."

Luke grinned. "There's not much to tell. One morning I woke up and decided I was fed up with my life the way it was. And I loved literary works. Made sense," he shrugged. "Seemed like a good idea."

Sophia laughed. Luke recalled the day so clearly when he had spoken with his mother. She had been furious. He still felt sick when he recalled her words.

She had been in the library and he'd gone there to speak with her, wanting to avoid confronting her and his father together. He had already broached the idea with Father, to be told that he would be disowned were he to do such a thing, even if secretly his father approved. It wasn't acceptable, that a nobleman earned money.

"I could never have imagined a day when my own son said such a thing," she'd said. Luke swallowed. The memory still hurt. Her pale blue eyes had stared at him, coldly.

“Mama…It’s a bookshop. I don’t see anything shameful in it.”

“Shame on you, then,” she’d said. She had listened to none of his protests, refusing to speak of the subject. When he’d eventually left the room, he’d gone straight upstairs, too distressed to think.

That was when he’d decided to leave. He’d spoken to Epsom, who had agreed with him.

“Can’t be helped, Luke. We can organize something. An allowance. You’re still yourself, and my brother.”

Luke sniffed now, feeling the touch of those words in his heart. He missed Epsom. He wondered what he would say if he told him about Sophia.

“It was a few years ago?” Sophia asked, her voice bringing him back to the bookshop and the morning. He had to agree.

“Six years ago. I’m eight and twenty. Not getting younger.” He chuckled.

“That’s not old, silly.” Sophia laughed.

They both smiled. He had worried, when he discovered how young she was, that she would be uncomfortable. She was the same age as Amelia, Gilbert had told him; which made her eight years younger

than himself. Gilbert had found this out from Amelia, who was – apparently – part of Sophia's circle.

"Shall we take lunch together?" Luke asked, gesturing at the window. "It looks like it'll rain soon. But I have an umbrella."

"You do?" Sophia grinned. Luke understood her surprise – they were fairly rare. He himself had received his as a gift when he was at Cambridge. It was kept behind the bookshop cupboard, where he could be sure no customers might borrow it.

"I do," Luke replied, feeling proud of it. "I'd be delighted to escort you to the inn as well."

Sophia giggled.

"And now," he said, raising a brow. "I suppose we have a good hour in which to do as the clue suggests."

Sophia looked pleased. She cleared her throat, a small frown creasing her brow as she thought about something. "Well, I'll start. When did you first think of opening the bookshop?"

Luke leaned back, clearing his throat, and feeling oddly pleased with the question. He had never actually talked about that with anyone. It had been when he was at Cambridge, and then it had seemed a crazy idea. He had discussed his love of books with Claudia, but he'd never actually told her of his plan. It seemed too unconventional then.

“It was when I started studying,” he began. “In my first year of Cambridge, when I was nineteen years old.”

They talked until half an hour past midday, by which time it had started raining. Luke stood, going to the door.

“We must needs take a coach to the inn,” he said, squinting out at the rain. “If I might escort both you and your chaperone under the umbrella? We can wait on the pavement by the park, where trees shelter it.”

“Oh!” Sophia grinned. “A fine idea! This will be an adventure.” She clapped her hands excitedly.

It was. Luke held the umbrella, conscious of her closeness. She stood beside him, shoulder touching his arm, so close he could smell the lavender of her hair. He breathed in, senses swimming. He walked slowly, aching to kiss her.

“Raining hard now,” Jane commented. She was behind them, sharing the dry spot under the umbrella. Luke could see the rain pelting down, and feel its coldness.

“Indeed so. But we will be sheltered in a moment. Patience, dear lady!”

They all laughed. He led them across the street to the park, where they stood and waited for the coach to drive past. Luke hailed it. They all piled in, laughing, trying to avoid the worst of the rain.

“My Lady! You’re soaked through,” Luke grinned. Water showed on her hair and eyebrows and he reached for his handkerchief, gently wiping it. She looked up at him and he leaned forward tenderly, so close that his lips almost brushed hers. It was a second and Jane, exclaiming, brought them to the moment.

“Look! I can see the theatre!”

They jumped, and then all three of them laughed. It was a merry ride. Luke helped them down at the inn, leading the way to the parlour. Sitting eating stew and drinking ale, it was a merry meal, seeming like nothing had passed between that day and the last time they took lunch.

Except, Luke thought with a smile, that so much had changed. Sophia sat laughing and talking merrily, and his heart filled with joy seeing her thus.

They finished luncheon, and he sighed. “I must return to the bookshop,” he said softly. “There is a lot to do – books to unpack and the like. And mayhap some customers.”

Sophia giggled. “Well, I shall return tomorrow,” she said. “We haven’t talked nearly enough. And besides, we need to read page forty-two.”

They both grinned. Luke let out a sigh. He was going to miss her. “I’ll see you tomorrow, then,” he agreed.

“Indeed,” she said.

He hailed them a coach and then walked back to his lodgings, not able to shake the memory of the afternoon. That moment when his lips had almost tasted hers was irresistible. His mind returned to it as he sat at his desk. He couldn’t help the joy in his heart that he was sure showed also on his face.

“Tomorrow I shall see her again.”

He could not wait for tomorrow to arrive.

Chapter 23

“Jane,” Sophia frowned, “might we stop at the dressmaker’s?” she asked. Her spirits were high, and she was still smiling about the luncheon. They were in the coach, and it occurred to her that they had agreed to go back to check progress in four days from then. The dressmaker’s was not far from the bookshop, and it made sense to stop off there on the way home again.

“I don’t see why not,” Jane replied. She stuck her head out to call to the driver. “Mister! Ahoy!”

They arranged the diversion from the plan, and Sophia felt relieved as they rolled up to the street where the dressmaker’s shop was. It was still open, probably just after lunch.

“Let’s go in,” she said to Jane. They hurried up the street and into the shop.

The dress needed another day, the dressmaker said. It was almost finished and Sophia stared, feeling her eyes widen. She hadn’t expected it to be quite that nice. She was excited about it.

“Let’s hurry back,” she called to Jane, as they left the shop. “It’s raining again.”

“Yes. And we have no umbrella, like before,” Jane agreed.

They both laughed and hurried across the road. Jane bumped into someone as they ran and Sophia, running ahead, hastily turned back.

"It was nothing," Sophia insisted to the person, an older gentleman who seemed at first annoyed, but instantly calmed down when he saw who had run into him.

"Of course. Think nothing of it," he agreed hastily, helping Jane up. While they talked, Sophia glanced around uneasily. The rain was not strong, but something had unnerved her. When she looked up, she saw a gentleman watching them.

Her heart almost stopped.

It was Lord Cull. And this time, she could not mistake the fact that he'd seen her. Her breath tightened. He was coming across the street, the drizzle not deterring him. She turned.

Without thinking, she started to run. He had crossed the street now, and she hurried away.

"Halt!" he shouted. He had started running too. Sophia ran, lifting her skirt, her ankles flying as she raced. She had always been a good runner, and now she was grateful for the experience. Her boots slid on the cobbles; the rain soaked her. She ran.

"Please…don't let him catch me," she whispered. She was running, and fortunately the street was half-empty. She didn't look where she was going; she didn't care. Some instinct led her around people. She

ran ahead, pelting down the alley. She saw him entering the alley, and realized she couldn't escape.

She didn't think he'd seen her yet. She whirled around and ran straight into a shop. She instantly regretted it. The place was dark, and the air smelled stale; the scent of coffee mixed strongly with the general malodour of cooking and dirt. She shivered when some men eyed her with undisguised interest. It felt threatening and she felt in danger.

Instantly, she turned away and ran back through the door.

"Sophia?"

"Luke!"

Luke was standing on the doorstep, a look of wonderment on his face as he looked down at her. Sophia stepped back, staring up with wide eyes. Her heart was still beating fast from shock, fear gripping her.

"Sophia! Sweet lady, whatever are you doing here?" he asked. Then, his brows lowering, "Are you well?"

"Luke," she whispered. "I'm sorry. I got lost. I was scared," she added. "I ran in here looking for a safe place, and, well…" she lifted a shoulder in an eloquent shrug.

"It's one of the worst coffee-houses in London," he finished. "A

dangerous place. Even I don't go in there without Gilbert – we were only going in because he left his coat somewhere. Gilbert?" he said over his shoulder.

"Yes, Luke. I'll go and get it. Good afternoon, My Lady." The tall man bowed to her and walked past, going in through the door and shutting it behind him.

"Sophia…are you sure you're all right?" Luke asked softly.

"Oh, Luke…" Suddenly, she couldn't help it. The shock, the confusion, the exhaustion – all of them came together and she started sobbing. Instantly, he reached out to hold her and she fell against his chest, wrapping her arms tight around him.

"Shh," he said gently. "Hush, now. It's all well. You're safe. Cry, dearest, as long as you want."

Sophia started sobbing. Since she was a child – and even when she was one – nobody had held her, had comforted her when she was sad; had told her she was safe and that she could cry. She clung to Luke and he held her, his arms tight around her as he stroked her hair and told her she was safe.

"Sorry," she sniffed, looking up at him. She was sure she looked a mess, her face wet with tears. She took a breath, trying to compose herself.

"You don't need to be sorry, sweet lady," Luke said gently. He led her around the side of the building, where there was a space away from

the door. His hand stroked her cheek, where her hair was plastered to the dampness of tears.

"Truly?" she sniffed again.

He looked at her warmly and drew her close stroking her hair. "Of course not," he said. He ran his fingers gently down her back. "I could not be more delighted that you trust me."

She realized she was standing with his arm still around her, one hand on his shoulder. His chest was pressed against her, and she could feel his muscled strength where they touched. She looked into his eyes, her body flooding with longing and wonder.

She knew she should step away, but at the same time there was nothing she wanted more than to stand here, their bodies pressed together, his eyes staring into hers.

"Thank you." She murmured the word, her eyes on his face.

"Sophia," he said softly. He reached down and rested his hand on her cheek and, before either of them realized what was happening, his lips pressed against hers. She felt their touch – so soft, and yet firm and insistent. She drew him close against her, longing coursing through her body, wonderment tingling through her nerves. His mouth moved on hers and she felt a need to hold him tighter, to never let go.

He stepped back. His eyes looked a little wild. "Sophia…" he whispered. "Sorry. I shouldn't have…"

“Shh, now.” She raised a hand, resting it on his. “Luke…you did not offend me.” She couldn’t help smiling. Her heart felt radiant inside, every nerve of her singing like a chorus in sweet harmony.

“Good,” he said. He let out a long sigh. His breath was ragged, she noticed, and she was sure his heart beat as fast as her own. “I would hate to scare you.”

Sophia smiled. “I assure you I was not scared. Now, shall we try to get away from here? I think it’s not safe.”

Luke chuckled. “You could be right, Sophia. Let us see if we can find our way back. The bookshop is not too far away.”

Sophia swallowed hard. “I left Jane at the dressmaker’s,” she said. “Could we go there? It’s Mrs. Hensley’s.”

“I see,” Luke replied. He didn’t ask her any questions, which relieved her. How could she bear to tell him what she was running from? She couldn’t say her mother had only allowed her to come here to be courted by the Marquess. He would think she had deceived him.

“Thank you,” she said. They walked back down the street. She was relieved to see that there was no sign of the marquess here. They followed the road back to the dressmaker’s in silence, Sophia acutely conscious of his hand in hers. She kept on thinking of that sweet kiss.

“We’re almost there,” Luke said gently. “Now, you take care. And if

anything happens – anything at all – you tell me."

"Yes, Luke."

He looked at her fondly and squeezed her fingers. "I can see the dress-shop there. And there's Jane. I'll see you tomorrow, then?"

"Yes. See you tomorrow," Sophia said. She looked up at him, heart soaring. She was aware that they were still concealed in entrance of the narrow road. He bent forward and pressed his lips to her face.

"Until tomorrow, sweetest lady." He bowed and turned away.

"Until tomorrow."

She looked after him, heart pounding, and then hurried towards Jane.

She met her just outside the bookshop. Jane embraced her; eyes wide.

"Oh! I was so frightened!" she sobbed. "I thought you were lost and something terrible had happened to you! Oh, My Lady! Let's get back to the coach at once." Jane was crying, her face showing relief as well as her immense fear as tears rolled down her cheeks.

"Jane. I'm quite safe. Sorry that I scared you," Sophia said gently. She took Jane's hand and the two of them walked back up the street

towards the coach. “I didn’t mean to get lost.”

“Oh, My Lady,” Jane murmured. “What happened? Why did you run off? Who was that gentleman who shouted?”

Sophia swallowed hard. What could she say? She couldn’t let Jane know the real reason. “He was somebody I met. A bad person,” she said honestly. None of that was dissembling.

“Oh, my poor lady,” Jane said instantly. She squeezed her hand and the two of them walked up to the coach. Jane waved to the driver, getting his attention. “That’s shocking. I’m so sorry. We’re almost home and you can have a nice hot bath. Should we tell a constable of the Watch?”

Sophia smiled, tears coming to her eyes. Jane was so kind!

“No,” she said softly. “I don’t think it’s the sort of thing the Watch could do aught about. But thank you.”

“Not at all, My Lady. We’re almost home. I could fancy a spot of tea when we get back.”

Sophia felt the same way. She felt exhausted. Her legs still twitched from the run; her feet sore from racing over cobbles in hard-soled boots. She shut her eyes. Instantly, thoughts of the kiss came flooding back. She couldn’t help the fact that, however terrifying it had been, that made it all so much better.

And she would see him again tomorrow.

Chapter 24

Luke sat in his study. The window was behind him, the light falling in onto the desk. His study faced west, and the sunlight shone in because it was almost night. Luke could hear the sounds of traders in the marketplace packing up their stalls, some of them arguing as they made last-minute exchanges. He ignored it, not turning around to look through the window.

“Damn it, but I can’t stop thinking of her.”

He grinned to himself. The feeling of her lips on his haunted him. She tasted sweet and her lips were soft as they parted under his. He ached to hold her, to draw her against him and wrap his arms around her, holding her close. The longing was almost unbearable.

He stood and went to the door, going out into the hallway. It was almost dinnertime. He went to find the butler and call for a cup of tea. The hallway was dark and he walked carefully, trying not to fall downstairs. He wondered why the butler hadn’t yet done his job of lighting lamps.

“A cup of tea, please,” he called down the stairs, finding his servant in the hallway, beginning his duties of lamp-lighting there.

“Yes, Sir.”

Luke walked back to the study, feeling his way along the wall until he reached the pool of sunshine by the door and could see again. He

reached the study, almost tripped on the uneven boards, and sat down wearily.

"You have to do something about this," he said to himself. The house was a mess. He was in love and he couldn't doubt it. But how could he think to bring Sophia here? He couldn't expect her to fall downstairs because the butler hadn't done his job with lamp-lighting! He looked around the room and shivered. It was dirty, cold and messy. He couldn't even think of showing her this place.

"And I want to court her properly."

But, how could he hope to remedy it? He had no funds apart from his allowance, and sales at the bookshop had not been good. He needed to think of something.

"Epsom might be the one to ask."

He felt his fingers lacing together, his knuckles cracking. It was a nervous habit and he made himself stop, resting hands on the desk. He hated the thought of contacting his family. Epsom had always been fair, but how could he think of speaking with him? It felt like an impossible choice.

I turned my back on them when I chose this place. I cannot go back because I need help.

Both his parents had said he had chosen. He was no longer a Beaumont. He had turned his back on them by choosing to follow his dreams.

He went to the door, feeling restless. Part of him wanted to write to Epsom, to tell him how he felt; or just to ride to Averley and tell him he needed help. But that was unfair – how could he expect his brother to help him when he'd almost disgraced them?

"Father said I could not follow my dream and stay with the family."

He had made his choice.

"Sir?" the butler called, coming up the stairs. "Your tea, Sir. And the Gazette just arrived. Will you read it?"

"Not now, thank you," Luke said. "I'll read it at breakfasttime tomorrow." He accepted the cup of tea – weak and milky – grimaced at the taste and leaned back, weary.

"I couldn't make her come here." He shut his eyes a moment, exhausted by worrying. He would have loved to invite Lady Sophia to dine – with her chaperone accompanying her, and maybe Gilbert and a few others to make it respectable, he could.

The house was another matter. He looked around, going out of the study and across to the drawing-room. It still smelled bad, no matter how often they dusted it or lit the fires. He sniffed the curtains – they were probably mildewed.

"No…either I need to borrow money and fix this place up, or I need to

carry on taking her to the inn until she wonders whether I actually live here."

He heard the butler coming up the stairs and tensed alertly, seeing he was carrying a tray of dinner. The smell was delicious, and he felt his stomach twist with hunger.

He followed the fellow to the table and, as soon as he was gone, ate his meal.

"I'll think about it tomorrow," he decided.

He couldn't do anything about it then, anyway.

As he lay in bed, thoughts of Lady Sophia returned to his mind and he couldn't ignore them. He wanted to kiss her, wanted to be able to court her in the way she should be.

His thoughts turned to worry. Why had she been running away? She had said something about a scare, but she hadn't been specific. He wished he'd asked her more carefully. She needed his help.

"Stop it…you're being silly."

She had said she'd got a fright, and he believed her. Why would she be hiding something? He might as well believe her – London was full of robbers and thieves…one of them could have approached her and she bolted. There could be any number of possible explanations.

He shut his eyes and lay back, letting his thoughts flood with memories of her. He could not wait to see her again, and he hoped that they would solve the next clue soon.

At nine o' clock, he was already in the bookshop. He was still turning over the thoughts of writing to Epsom. He had constructed every reason why not – Epsom might not even be there; he might be on business. There wasn't any use to be had from writing him a letter when he didn't know where he was.

"Good morning?"

"Oh!" Luke jumped. It was Lady Sophia! She was in the doorway, wearing a blue dress. And she was smiling. "Good morning." He stood, bowed, and gestured her to the desk, his heart soaring even as his mind still grappled with worries.

"You look industrious, Sir," she said, gesturing at the desk. The accounts were spread out over the surface, his quill resting where he had just been dipping it. He shrugged.

"Not at all. Not busy at all." He grinned, "And how are you this morning? You look well-rested."

She gave him a happy look. "I am. Jane and I spent the morning drinking tea and playing the piano."

“Oh!” he felt his cheeks lift in a grin. It was a lovely thing to imagine, her playing. He knew how beautiful she looked when she did so; the candlelight soft on her hair, her face set in concentration.

“I was speaking with Lettie recently,” Sophia explained. “She said she was thinking of hosting a party. Just a small one. Would you consider attending?” she blushed.

Luke felt his heart flood with feeling. He was touched. It took courage, to invite him. But how could he go? He would have to formally court her soon, or he risked ruining her reputation if they were seen together too often. But at the same time, would he not ruin it anyway?

How could she be seen with a humble shopkeeper?

He knew how cruel the Ton were. He did not want to expose her to that. He hadn’t thought seriously about these matters until the previous day, when the intensity of his feelings had prompted him to do so.

“Sir?” she prompted. She looked upset.

“Sorry…I was just lost in thought. I don’t know when I will have a free evening – Gilbert is often here, or out at some coffee-house or other, and I tend to go along,” he said. “I like to know he’s safe.”

It was true – he did accompany Gilbert with the secondary aim of keeping his friend from getting into fights. But he also knew that, if he had a party to attend, Gilbert would tell him to go.

“I see,” Sophia said. He tensed, hoping she didn’t think he was lying. But she shrugged, setting the topic aside.

“How was your journey?” he asked, gesturing to the window. The sunshine was bright outside and it was a warm day, truly like summertime.

“Oh. Lovely,” she said quickly. “Shall we look at the book now?” she added, drawing it out of her handbag.

Luke had to agree, dismissing the thought that she’d tried to change the subject. “Of course. Let’s have a look. I am so interested to see what comes next.”

“Yes. I am too.”

They opened the book. The next instruction was to turn to page forty-five, and they did so. When they got there, it was to encounter another clue. This one was written in the margin.

“Go to the iron-merchant, and fetch a set of scales. Help each other to work it. Then read the second-last page.”

Sophia looked at Luke. Luke shrugged.

“I don’t think we need to buy scales,” he said. “Our friend at the

bakery has some. Shall we go and borrow them?"

Sophia chuckled. "Let's do that. It's better than trying to find somewhere where they'll sell us a pair!"

Luke felt his spirits lift as she looked fondly in his direction. He hadn't realized how concerned he had felt about her. She seemed more distant that morning and it had worried him, but seeing her smile made him feel better.

They went next door to the bakery and, after a lot of explaining – Luke said he needed it for the shop and had to hastily think of a reason, which he said was to check counterfeit money – they borrowed it.

"Look at that," Sophia said, running a hand down it. "I have never seen one up close. What do we do with it?"

"I don't know," Luke admitted. "I reckon we need some weights. He's lent us a few." He took them out of his pocket, putting them one by one on the table. The scale consisted of a dish, suspended from a bar. On the other side of the bar was a little tray, on which weights would be balanced. Luke frowned, trying to work it out.

"A quarter," Sophia said, lifting a smallish weight. "The standard must be a pound, correct?"

"Yes," Luke frowned. "Probably. So…all we need is to find things that weigh a quarter pound." He grinned, looking around.

“Yes!” Sophia’s eyes sparkled. She lifted the little weight in one hand, looking about the shop. “A book. Is there a heavy book?”

Luke chuckled. “Yes! Let’s find a dictionary. No…too heavy. Maybe a long novel?”

They ran around the shop, trying things; lifting the weight, trying to guess what might weigh the same. Then, after a few false starts, they managed to balance it.

“There. So, that weighs the same as this tiny weight there,” Luke said, leaning back. He felt quite tired. The tiny weight, marked with a quarter, was balancing two small novels.

“That’s quite strange,” Sophia grinned. “That one could fit in my pocket,” she gestured. “Those certainly couldn’t.”

“Exactly,” Luke agreed. He looked at the scales. It was odd, how the weights were the same, though the objects were so different. Odd how they were equivalent – at least when looked at in terms of mass.

It was a funny concept at all, he thought – equivalences.

“Shall we read the clue now?” Sophia asked, disrupting his thoughts.

“Yes, let’s,” Luke said. “I can’t wait too long or the curiosity will drive

me mad."

They both laughed. Luke couldn't keep the warmth from his eyes as she went over to the desk. He sat down across from her, his fingers touching hers as they both bent over the writing.

"Here we are…" Sophia turned the page. He was close enough to smell the lavender scent of her hair, and he shut his eyes briefly, trying to concentrate. When he opened them, she was underlining the script that had been scribbled on a page.

This clue was loose, he noticed, slid into the book so that the page could be left untouched. He watched Sophia take the page out and read it carefully.

"When you balance the scales, you put two objects of equivalent weight on either side. What is equivalent? How often do you weigh your dreams?"

Sophia frowned. Luke considered it, slowly.

The words made no sense to him just then, but he didn't say anything; waiting to see what she would say.

"This is a hard one," Sophia said. Her brow was knotted with thought. Luke agreed. The clues had varied in complexity – from simple ones to ones that took days. This one was not the most obscure, but it was pretty obscure – easily in the range of the hardest two of them – the poetry, and the museum question.

Luke frowned. Weights. Equivalences.

“Weighing your dreams,” he said slowly. “That means that you put something on the one side that you think is equivalent.”

“Yes,” Sophia said slowly. “Weighing your…oh! Luke! I think I know! I think he is trying to say that you can’t weigh them! And yet, we try. How often do we give up on what is precious, what is deepest in our hearts, in exchange for something that has no value compared to a dream?”

“Yes!” Luke said at once. Then he frowned. It made sense, absolute sense. But what sort of things did she mean? He coughed. “Could you explain, Sophia? What things do you mean?”

“Like duty,” Sophia said.

“Yes.”

Neither of them spoke. The idea was so big, so complex, that it was taking time, changing his thoughts as it sunk in. At the same time, however, it was clear. Nothing was equal to dreams.

“Sophia…” he paused. “I think I am going to have to think about this a while. I feel quite confused.”

“Me too,” Sophia grinned. “I suppose, well…it’s something different to how we have thought.”

“Yes.”

Luke considered the clue, knowing he would need a few days to let it settle. He wanted Sophia to stay, but he wasn’t sure if he could ask her to remain. She cleared her throat.

“There’s something else on the page,” she said, bending. The writing was tiny, and it needed to be read closely. Luke waited, hoping she would read aloud. “It says that we should wait and then tomorrow read page fifty-five.”

“Good,” Luke said, letting out a sigh. He wasn’t sure if he could think harder today. And he was glad to have more time to think. He looked at the clock.

“Shall we take some lunch?” he asked.

Sophia shook her head. “I should go,” she said. “I have promised Lettie I’d go for tea. I don’t feel that I can refuse to show up…she would wonder why I hadn’t let her know earlier that I wouldn’t appear.”

“Oh,” Luke said. “Well…that sounds like it could be quite nice.” He couldn’t tell, even though she seemed apologetic, if she really meant it or if she just didn’t want to take lunch.

Stop it, he told himself. You just cannot imagine why she would want to take interest in you, and trying to find every reason why she wouldn't.

Sophia looked up, a friendly look on her gentle face. "Well, I think it could be fun, yes," she agreed. "It's a pity I can't stay…but then today was quite a complicated clue. I reckon we could do with time resting."

Luke grinned. "Yes, I suppose so."

"And don't forget to take the scales back," Sophia added, reaching for her shawl. "We did promise that we would only have them an hour. I am sure we took them at ten past ten."

"Oh, yes!" Luke stood up, already reaching to pack the scales away. It was half-past eleven, and he was sure the baker was already feeling quite angry. He absolutely didn't want to fight with the fellow. He put the weights in his pocket, carrying the largest, and got ready to take the equipment back.

"I look forward to seeing you tomorrow, Mr. Beaumont," Sophia said, standing to leave. She looked fondly at him. She was standing very close and, staring into her green eyes, he found it impossible to resist her beauty. He bent forward, reached out, and pressed his lips to the back of her wrist.

"Oh! Mr. Beaumont," she gasped.

He felt how his heart raced to see her flushed and smiling. Her skin

smelled like powder and it felt soft and cool where his fingertips held her arm. It made him long for her.

“I will return at ten,” she said, indicating the clock. Her voice trembled. “We shall move to the next clue tomorrow.”

“Good,” Luke said. “I will see you then. I look forward to it.” He coughed. His own throat was too tight for speech.

“I do too.”

He gazed warmly across at her, heart filling with joy to hear her say that. She walked out into the street, Jane following her. He went over to the desk, his mind full of thoughts. He knew he would be returning to that moment all day, and to the thoughts the clue had prompted him to consider closely.

Chapter 25

Sophia hurried down the street, Jane following her. Her thoughts were a tapestry of imagery, some beautiful and some troubling. The kiss, the way Luke's hand felt on her skin, the warmth of his stare as his eyes held hers. Those were beautiful images. The disturbing ones were of Lord Cull.

I need to know what to do about this.

She leaned on Jane as they stopped dead, a cart jostling them against the wall as it moved closer, almost pinning them against the front of the shop.

"The cheeky fellow!" Jane said. She shook a fist, but the cart-driver didn't turn.

Sophia let out a sigh. London was full of such things – people could be reckless with carts, coaches or while on horseback. She dusted off her skirts as Jane complained vociferously about the fellow.

"The cheek of it! Now we'll be late."

"We might not," Sophia said. She raised a hand, gesturing for any coaches taking passengers that they were looking for a driver. She spotted a black, battered coach and waved again.

“Just in time,” Jane said, swinging up into the seat after Sophia had stopped the coach-driver. “That’s better. Straight home?”

“Yes. And then I’ll meet Lettie there.” She had agreed for Lettie to call on her today, knowing that she was going to be late coming back from Mr. Beaumont.

He did seem a little odd that morning, she reflected. He was often quiet, but there were times when they spoke that he seemed rather distant. She pushed the thought to the back of her mind, as Jane rummaged in her handbag. She drew out some sewing.

“Grand! That’ll give me time to sew that collar. It’s a very fine one… white on cream linen. When you can wear colours again, you must let me make one for you.”

“Thank you.” Sophia said fondly. “When I can wear colours again, I’ll wear every single colour there is!”

They both laughed. Sophia was surprised, but she was tired of brown, blue and black. She could barely wait to wear paler colours. She blushed, thinking of how she’d like to dress for when she could call on Mr. Beaumont again.

When they arrived home, it was almost midday. Sophia and Jane ran up the steps as the chimes went, and, laughing, Jane raced upstairs. She called down to Sophia.

“I’ll be in the drawing-room, should anyone need me.”

“I’ll take lunch in the dining-room with Lettie,” Sophia agreed. She hurried to the door, wishing she had time to check her hair. She was sure it must have tumbled down. She barely had a moment – Lettie would be there soon.

“Sophia!” Lettie said, as she walked in. The butler hovered behind her, but she had evidently run straight in. Sophia had only just sat down, and she stood up instantly. “There you are! So lovely!” Lettie embraced her.

“Lovely to see you too,” Sophia said, stepping back gently from the rose-scented whirlwind that was her friend. She gestured them both to the table. Lettie sat down opposite her, chattering excitedly as she spread her napkin on her knee and made herself comfortable.

“I am so happy! Culver came to call on me! And he has permission now! He spoke to Papa! It’s wonderful!” she clapped her hands, eyes wide. “And you must help me…I need to choose a gown for a salon.”

“I’ll try,” Sophia said. “What salon?”

“Oh! Lady Tarrant is hosting a salon this evening. I don’t know that I’ll enjoy it. I’m going because of who else is.”

Sophia had to smile, seeing her friend happy. She wished she could persuade her own mother to grant permission to Mr. Beaumont to court her. But that was never going to happen.

The butler arrived and placed bowls of clear broth before them. There was bread to accompany it, and Sophia helped herself to it, surprised by how hungry she was. Lettie sipped soup delicately, then ate appreciatively.

"You said you were planning a party?" Sophia asked.

"Yes! I want to host something. It should be small enough that you can attend, though. I mean, I know you can't go into society, not yet… and I want you to be there, so of course we shall keep it a small gathering."

"That's very nice of you," she said sincerely. "Who else will you invite?" Part of her hoped that Luke could be there. Maybe Amelia and Gilbert would be going.

"Well…I thought to ask you!" Lettie grinned. "Of course, Adeline and Amelia will be there, and all the rest. But is there anyone you think I should invite?" she asked thoughtfully.

"I don't know," Sophia said shyly. "Well…somebody…"

"Yes! Oh, Sophia!" she clapped her hands. "This is so exciting! You must tell me all about him."

Sophia swallowed hard. "Well…Lettie…" she took a breath. "He's…it's difficult to say, because he's not from our background."

“Oh!” Lettie’s eyes were wide. Her face could have reflected shock, or admiration or any number of intense responses. Sophia felt herself tense.

What would Lettie think? And did it matter, compared to the weight of dreams?

“He has a bookshop,” she said.

Her heart almost stopped. This was the first time she had told anyone, and she couldn’t guess the reaction.

“Oh!” Lettie clapped her hands. “Oh, Sophia! How romantic! Did you go there to buy a book, and meet him then? I can just imagine him. He’d be a poet…some shadowy, mysterious character ready to whisk you off to a land of mystery!”

Sophia laughed. “No, Lettie! He’s not like that at all!” she flapped a hand at her friend, teasing, as they both laughed.

“Well…you can’t blame me for imagining that,” Lettie replied.

“It seems so funny! It would be funny, if you met him. Actually…” she trailed off. Lettie had met him! He’d been at the party the other night! Surely she must have seen him! And yet, she didn’t seem to have any idea about him or who he was.

“Oh!” Lettie gasped. “Oh, Sophia…he wasn’t…the mystery fellow?”

“Which one?” Sophia asked. The way Luke had explained it over dinner that night, neither he nor his friend were invited formally.

“The less tall one. The one with the dark hair! I should have guessed!”

“Yes. That’s right.” She blushed. It was no surprise that Lettie noticed – it would have been impossible for her to hide her affection for Luke. “Him…tall, with dark hair and dark eyes.” She paused as Lettie interrupted her happily.

“Oh! Sophia! Oh, I’m so pleased! He is handsome, is he not? Well…I can see he is. Not like Culver, of course, but, well…” she trailed off as Sophia chuckled.

“We shan’t compare them. Your Culver is as handsome for you as my Luke is.”

“Luke! A lovely name! Oh, Sophia! How do we invite him to this party?”

Sophia shut her eyes a moment, thinking. She had an idea. “We could give Gilbert a message,” she said slowly.

“Gilbert.”

“His friend. The fellow Amelia knows.”

“Oh!” Lettie clapped her hands. “Oh! This is so diverting! Yes! Let’s do that. We’ll ask this fellow to take the invitation to him. What a grand thought! And Amelia is coming to my house for tea, so of course we shall!”

“That sounds like a wonderful idea,” Sophia said softly. She felt excitement flood through her. She could really invite Luke! It wouldn’t be direct, but she could write the message in such a way that he would never guess it was her. She was going to do it. She had traded dreams for duty, and she was not going to do it anymore. Loveless duty was a prison, and where there was love, there was only joy.

Chapter 26

Luke walked along the street on the way to luncheon. The Tatfield Coffee-House might be noisy, dark and disreputable by all descriptions, but it was easily better, food-wise, than anything his cook had ever produced. That was inarguably the only reason he went there. That, and the occasional promise of good company.

“Better than sitting about on one’s own, by far.”

He pulled his tophat down, wishing it could help him to stay a little warmer. It was so cold outside, the sky dark and he shoved a hand into his pockets, keeping his fingers warm. He wove between the crowds, making his way forwards. Despite the weather, there were plenty of people abroad on the street, and Luke stepped around gentlemen and wove his way between handcarts and eventually reached the door of the coffee-house.

“Good afternoon, Sir,” the proprietor greeted him as he walked in.

“Yes, good afternoon,” Luke greeted, looking absently over the heads of the patrons as he took off his hat. Inside it was dark and stifling, the air close and unbearably warm compared to outside. He shrugged off his coat and handed it to the proprietor. His fingers and ears were starting to heat up from the heat inside, and he felt them throbbing sorely.

“Thank you,” he murmured. He continued looking as his eyes adjusted to the darkness in the building. He spotted a tall form hunched over the table by the window and grinned to himself. He walked over as quietly as possible, doing his best to avoid catching the fellow’s eye

until he was almost touching him.

“Good afternoon, Gilbert!” he called out; loudly enough to be heard.

“Oh! Luke! Gosh!” Gilbert put a hand on his chest, chest rising. “You scared me properly, you did.”

Luke chuckled. “Sorry, Gilbert,” he said softly. “I didn’t mean to scare you so much.”

“You happened upon me when I was lost in thought,” Gilbert said, as Luke pulled up a chair and sat down beside him. “Something of a puzzling nature just happened to me.” He steepled his hands, inviting questioning.

“How puzzling?” Luke asked, leaning forward and sticking up his hand to attract the attention of the proprietor.

“Well…like this,” Gilbert said, as Luke performed a series of hand-signals to the proprietor. “You see…I was calling on Lady Amelia this morning – we had agreed to meet in the park, so it wasn’t too difficult to have a moment or two alone – and she passed on an invitation to me. Only, it includes you.”

“What?” Luke frowned. This was a surprise! Of all the things he could have expected to hear that morning, that was something completely unforeseen. “What manner of invitation?”

“Well…it’s from that friend of Amelia’s. Lady Lettie. We met her at the party that other night. If you recall it?” Gilbert raised a brow, grinning.

“Of course, I recall it,” Luke said hotly. Then he felt his expression soften. “I don’t recall anybody else being there, mind you. Only yourself and Lady Sophia.”

“Yes,” Gilbert said warmly. “I thought you might.” He continued, reaching for something in his pocket, then frowning and trying his coat-pocket. “I read it earlier. It seems to be for a dance tomorrow, and a sit-down meal. Which, by all accounts, would be good regardless of company. Not often one gets free foodstuffs in London.”

“Gilbert!” Luke reprimanded him, grinning. “You know it’s not just about that.”

“I know,” Gilbert replied. “Shall I say it’s a yes, then?”

“Assuredly,” Luke replied. He could not help but feel his heart melt a little. This was Lady Sophia’s doing, he was sure of it! He was deeply touched that she’d thought to invite him. But, how could she risk her reputation by explaining their friendship to Lady Lettie? It seemed like she was taking a risk. He hoped she had not risked doing some damage to her reputation by doing this for him.

“Well, then,” Gilbert said lightly, “I suppose I shall tell her yes from both of us, then? And you’ll let me come and dress at your lodgings, too? I am sure it would be better that way than if I turn up and disgrace both of us!” Gilbert grinned.

“Yes,” Luke agreed absently. “But…Gilbert…this troubles me.”

“How can it possibly trouble you?”

“Lady Sophia must have asked her friend to include me in the invitations. If it spreads around among Ton members that Lady Sophia has an interest in a barely-viable bookshop proprietor, it will ridicule her. I don’t like to think of doing her damage.”

“Luke…” Gilbert shut his eyes. “You know what?”

“What?”

“You think too much, Luke. Truly, you do. Everyone at that party will have one advantage – they’ll see you. And you look excessively more noble than any drunken, rich nobleman I ever saw.”

“Gilbert!” Luke chuckled. He felt himself redden. That was easily the nicest thing Gilbert had ever said. He hoped it was true. “And you also look exceedingly more noble,” he added softly.

“I know that isn’t true,” Gilbert said with a grin. “But I will take it in the spirit of things. Now. What are you going to wear? And what should I wear? I’m planning to talk to Lady Amelia’s father next week.”

“What?” Luke said for the second time. “Gilbert! My congratulations.”

“Not yet,” Gilbert said, swallowing uneasily. “I almost wish I didn’t have to do this…asking for permission means he could refuse it. And then it’d be much harder to make visits.”

“But you still would,” Luke said uncertainly.

Gilbert grinned. “Of course, I would! I am fairly sure Amelia would want me too, also.”

“Well, then,” Luke said with a friendly expression. “That seems a satisfactory arrangement.”

When they left the coffee-house, Luke was still considering Gilbert’s words. He knew that he should take the same attitude to society. Gilbert didn’t care what society thought of him and Amelia, and neither should they. But Luke had no idea of what Sophia would say about the same societal rules and norms. She would want them respected; of that he had no doubt whatsoever.

He pushed the thought aside. He ought to find his courage and approach her mother. After all, he was best friends with the late earl. That had to count for something.

As he walked, Luke got an uncomfortable sensation; a prickling feeling on the back of his neck, like someone was following him. He turned around, feeling jumpy.

“Who’s there?” he called.

He spotted nobody. The street was damp, the clouds low and there were very few people around. Luke could see three men within five paces of him, one of whom was studiously looking at the notices on the wall outside the coffee-house.

He looked at him carefully. He was wearing a black jacket and black trousers, and his collar was turned up to keep out the cold. He couldn’t really see his face clearly, or discern the colour of his hair, since he wore a tophat that covered it. All the same, Luke felt like the fellow was too engrossed in the notices – they weren’t possibly that interesting. He shuddered, turning away.

“All sorts in London,” he murmured.

He didn’t think the fellow looked like he needed to rob someone – after all, he was well-dressed and looked well-off. But one oughtn’t to assume anything, he reckoned. He pulled his coat about him and walked on, going intentionally faster.

When he reached the bookshop, he looked around nervously. He couldn’t see anyone in the street, but it was dark and it was almost impossible to notice anyone in the shadow by the wall. He took his key out of his pocket, unlocked the door and went into the shop. Shrugging out of his coat, he turned to hang his hat on the stand.

“Strange,” he murmured to himself. He was sure he saw a dark-coated man walk past outside the window. He pushed the thought away, determined to forget about it.

“You’re really just imagining things,” he told himself firmly. He went to the desk and sat down, hoping for customers.

It was a lucky afternoon – he had three customers, and another one just before he locked up. He sold five or six books, which was a nice number to write down. Intake was looking promising already and it wasn’t even Friday yet. He locked the cashbox and went home. As he walked, he couldn’t help thinking of the party.

“I’ll wear my navy suit and a new cravat,” he told himself firmly. No harm in looking somewhat elegant, after all. If he intended to convince Lady Sophia he was worth the risk – and she was taking a big risk – then the least he would have to do is dress properly.

The next evening, Luke sat in his bedroom while Gilbert examined suits in the big pile on the bed. He found himself wondering why Lady Sophia hadn’t visited the bookshop that day. He pushed away the thought, annoyed with himself. As if it wasn’t enough she’d invited him to a party! He should simply be excited…and he was certainly excited.

“Luke? How about the brown?” Gilbert asked, lifting up a brown tweed suit. Luke shook his head.

“No, Gilbert. Truly, it’s too big for you. You need one that’s going to fit you properly, I assure you.”

“Very well,” Gilbert agreed. “How about this one, then?” He held up a black one. Luke raised a brow.

“Reckon that’s perfect,” he said quickly. He was nervous, and trying to hide it. What would she think of him? And would her friends really accept him? She must believe they would, since she was taking this step.

“Grand. What of you?” Gilbert asked, unceremoniously taking off his coat and unbuttoning his hose. Luke watched in disbelief as his friend proceeded to undress in front of him, shrugging on the new coat and breeches as if he was at home.

“Well, I…” Luke looked away, trying to hold in his amusement. “I am considering that.” He gestured to the suit hanging on the front of his cupboard door.

“Ah! Splendid, Luke!” Gilbert announced, shrugging out the coat and sliding his long arms into it. “I declare! You’ll look grand.”

“Thank you, Gilbert,” Luke agreed. “I’ll just change clothes, and then we can summon Kenley to help us with our cravats.”

“Splendid,” Gilbert said again.

When Luke was dressed, he paused to take stock of his appearance in the looking-glass. With his hair brushed and his cravat knotted high, he had to admit to himself that he looked rather modish. And, he blushed, quite good. His dark suit enhanced the colour of his brown eyes, and the white cravat made his face seem even more hollowed and shadowed, lending him some mystery.

“Luke, I declare! If anyone else looks as fine as we, you owe me ten pounds.”

“Not again,” Luke groaned, grinning at his friend. “Gilbert, if I owe you ten pounds, I’ll be indebted to you for the next year! No, don’t let’s say that. Or I’ll be even more nervous than I already feel.”

Gilbert laughed. “Right then. As you wish. Come on, let’s go. The invitation said six o’ clock, and we don’t want to be late.”

“No,” Luke said, following Gilbert down the stairs to the street below. “We don’t.”

They hailed a cab; the street already blue with darkness around them. Luke considered telling Gilbert about his imaginings the other day when he thought he might have been followed, then put the thought aside for later as he was far too excited about the party.

Chapter 27

“Lettie…Oh, Lettie, are you sure?” Sophia asked, looking at herself in the mirror. She felt full of excitement, her tummy tying itself in knots. She studied her hairstyle, glancing over her shoulder at Lettie, who looked at her fondly.

“Sophia, you look beautiful,” she said. “And of course, I am,” she added, reaching for her own sash, of blue ribbon. “Now…I think I’ll put earrings in.”

“Good idea,” Sophia agreed. “Lettie…you are sure? I mean, what if he doesn’t come?” Sophia asked, feeling her stomach tighten. It was scary – she had no way of knowing if Mr. Beaumont had even got the invitation. His friend might not have remembered to tell him!

“Of course, he will,” Lettie said gently. “Sophia, sweetheart…you must stop fretting so. Now, what think you of this feather?” she asked, reaching for a plume to put into her hair, consideringly.

“Oh, yes,” Sophia replied. “I think that’s grand. I need some help with my dress now, if you please?” She directed the question to Lettie’s maid, who was helping them both to dress. They were upstairs in Lettie’s chamber, the candles burning bright in a holder on the dressingtable, shedding enough light so that they could see their reflections clearly.

“Of course, My Lady,” the maid agreed, stepping forward. Sophia was wearing her petticoat and stays, her hair already arranged in a few soft curls, the rest of it clasped at the back into a loose chignon. Her heart-shaped face was framed with soft brown locks, and her green

eyes seemed bigger and brighter for contrast.

“Ah, Sophia!” Lettie said. The brown dress was almost on, the maid hastily fastening the last of the buttons up for her. “You look stunning!”

“Do I?” Sophia asked. She stepped back to look in the big gilt-framed looking-glass, heart thumping. Did the new dress look as nice as she hoped it would? Did she look pretty? Was it something Mr. Beaumont would admire?

“Oh!” Sophia exclaimed, staring ahead. “Oh, my!”

The brown dress clung to her bust, falling down to ankle-height. The brown silk had a soft glow, and the bodice was low-cut, showing her cleavage. Her hair was just a shade paler, and the dark silk of the gown brought out all its coppery highlights, and drew out the greenness of her eyes.

“See?” Lettie giggled. She was wearing blue, which suited her yellow-gold hair. “You look lovely! Now, let’s hurry down…Mama is setting the finishing touches in the ballroom, most likely.”

They both giggled, running down the steps hand-in-hand. Sophia slowed her steps, not wanting to let her hair tumble down. Once they reached the bottom they turned and looked at each other, excitement making them light-hearted and giggly.

“Oh, Lettie!” Sophia whispered. “I’m so nervous.”

“Me too,” Lettie said.

They carried on holding hands, tiptoeing into the dining-room. Someone was walking around in there, the sound of shoes hard on the wooden floor.

“Oh! Mrs. Ensley. Mama!” Lettie clapped her hands excitedly. “It looks so lovely! Let us help?” she gestured at the table, where Lady Oldham was just arranging flowers. They were chrysanthemums, and their white-and-pink-edged flowers looked beautiful against the white tablecloth. Mrs. Ensley, the housekeeper, was busy setting the table.

“Dearest, you don’t need to do anything. I’ll just finish the flowers,” Lady Oldham said fondly. She was dressed in a soft green dress, grey-toned and gentle. “Maybe you two could wait in the ballroom? I’ll join you there directly. I thought we’d dance first, and then sit down for the meal in about an hour from now?”

“Splendid!” Lettie clapped. “Come on, Sophia! Let’s go.”

Sophia swallowed hard. She was tense with nerves, excitement drawing every muscle in her body stiff like piano-string. She could barely wait for the dance to begin! She tiptoed into the ballroom.

“Oh! This looks exquisite,” Lettie declared, clasping her hands together appreciatively. Sophia could see why – the floor, which was grey marble – was polished to a high sheen, and the ceiling – white moulded plaster, supporting chandeliers – seemed endlessly high, though she thought that was partly illusory, brought about by the small clerestory windows and clever use of columns.

“Come on, Sophia!” Lettie said, taking her hand and all but dragging her to the other side of the ballroom. “The guests will start arriving any minute!”

Sophia stood beside her. The first guests were quick in arriving and she held her breath, waiting for Luke to be there. She hoped he would be. There was no way of knowing if he had responded to the invitation or not – especially since they hadn’t even sent him one!

“Lettie, I’m worried,” Sophia whispered.

“Stop worrying,” Lettie said gently. “He’ll be here, I’m sure.”

Sophia swallowed hard. She wished she could believe as readily as Lettie did that Mr. Beaumont really wanted her.

“Lord Mainsborough and Mr. Beaumont,” the butler announced.

“Oh!” Sophia jumped. He was here!

“Good evening,” he said, bowing low. He looked up at her, and the astonishment she saw written there made every uncertain second worthwhile. Her face glowed.

“Good evening, Mr. Beaumont. It is lovely to see you here.”

“I assure you; it is nothing compared to the delight I take in seeing you,” he said. His voice was raw. The sound of it caught fire to her nerves, making her stomach tingle and her face grow hot with flushing.

“Sir, you compliment me,” she said, grinning and dropping a curtsey.

“No; I say no more than what I see,” he said.

Her eyes held his and she felt as if they were alone, as if the wide ballroom had disappeared and it was just the two of them, sitting together as they did in the bookshop.

He moved along past her and into the hall, but not before they had exchanged a special grin.

Sophia felt trapped by the door. Every second, she was aware of him. He’d moved into the ballroom, and he was standing by the refreshments, not really engaging with the other guests, though also not being aloof or rude. He simply seemed to be waiting.

Sophia was relieved when, finally, the butler closed the doors. That meant she, Lettie and Lord and Lady Oldham could join their guests. She followed Lettie down the steps, trying not to look like she was desperate to cross the room and speak with Luke.

“A fine ballroom,” Luke said softly. He was standing behind her.

Sophia jumped, colour rushing into her cheeks.

“Yes,” she murmured, “it is. Very fine.”

“Though naught seems fine to me when I behold you,” Luke said softly. Sophia felt her stomach tie itself in a knot. She looked up at him and grinned.

“Oh, Luke,” she whispered.

“My Lady, it is an honour to be included in this party…truly it is. Might I ask you to join me in a dance?”

“Yes, My Lord. Indeed, you might.” She felt her cheeks blush red, amazed by her own boldness.

“The first one?” Luke asked. His grin made her skin tingle all over her body.

“Yes, the first.”

“Good.”

They both looked at each other warmly and Sophia took a breath, her heart pounding. She stood beside him, watching the hall. There were not many people there – Lettie had agreed to invite only eight couples,

to make it accessible to someone in mourning. They were all standing about the big room, laughing and talking among themselves. The brilliants on Lady Amelia's ballgown glittered, the candlelight was warm and golden and the sound of voices rising and falling in counterpoint to the steady thud of her heart.

The orchestra began to tune up and Sophia felt her heart thumping. She took a deep breath, excitement rushing through her as Luke led her onto the dancefloor. His hand rested on her waist.

"I do like the waltz," he murmured. "Only dance I was any good at, I recall."

Sophia grinned. "And it the most scandalous of dances!"

He chuckled, "I suppose so. But it feels different with you."

"It does," Sophia whispered. She was aware, intensely so, of the feeling of his hand resting in her waist, his fingers curling around her back. She shut her eyes a moment, letting herself catch her breath. She had never felt so intoxicated by anything.

The music started, slowly, but light and bright. She took a breath, half afraid she would forget how to waltz. Then, suddenly, it all started coming back. Without effort, she was suddenly dancing about the room, her steps delicate and his hand guiding her as they whirled and twirled about the room. Her skirt whispered around her ankles and his hand was warm on her.

"That was grand," Luke said. He was breathing heavily too. He looked

into her eyes. His body was pressed right against her, so close she could feel his heartbeat. They stopped and, while the other couples applauded, they simply stared into one another's eyes.

Sophia felt as if she was drowning in those dark depths. All that they had faced together, all the things they had achieved, had brought them closer together than she had ever felt to any person. She could feel the warmth of his breath on her cheek and she felt a sudden, surprising need. She longed for his lips to touch hers, to press down warm and tenderly and part hers lovingly.

"Thank you, Mr. Beaumont," she murmured gravely, dropping a curtsey. He bowed.

"I cannot find words to thank you," he said softly. "Shall we take refreshment?"

"Yes. I confess I am thirsty," Sophia agreed. She felt so shy.

They went to the refreshmentstable and Luke passed her a glass of cordial. She noticed, as he did, that the door to the terrace had been opened. He looked that way and she felt her cheeks burn with excitement.

"Let's go outside."

It was cold outdoors, and Sophia wished she'd brought more than just a lace wrap to keep the cold off. All the same, it was so exciting she barely noticed. She was alone outside with him.

The manor lay on the edge of town, set in its own private grounds. Outside, it was so quiet, and the sky was black velvet above, the autumnal stars big and golden like jewels. Sophia looked up, staring appreciatively upwards.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” Luke murmured.

“Yes,” she said softly. “So beautiful.”

She shivered as his hand lifted, resting on her shoulder. His eyes stared into hers.

“Lady Sophia,” he said gently. “I must tell you that I have never felt like this – exactly this – for anyone before. You…you touch my heart in ways I never imagined. I am in real earnest when I say that I must know if you feel anything like I do. I want to make my pursuit of you honourable, truly I do. I want all of London to know that I, the son of Lord Astley, wish to pursue the right to call on you at your home. Lady Sophia, I would like to know if that is something you’d find acceptable.”

“Luke!” Sophia stared. Of all the things she’d imagined his saying, that was the very last thing that would have come to her thoughts. “Luke...you would…you mean…” She blushed.

“I seek permission to court you, My Lady.”

“Yes,” she whispered. “Yes. I approve.”

She felt her cheeks grow hot. He looked at her warmly.

“Well, My Lady. I am…so glad.” He laughed, shakily. She was surprised to see his usually composed face shining with joy. She felt her heart glowing in her chest, the feeling rushing through her body and making her feel as if she might actually shine with warmth.

“Me too,” she murmured. She looked up into his eyes.

His hand tightened and he bent forward and, so gently, he pressed a kiss to her lips. Sophia shut her eyes, the touch of his lips against hers like honey. She ached to take him in her arms, to hold him close. His body was pressed to hers, his hand on her shoulder, the other one at her neck.

He stepped back; eyes wide. “Lady Sophia…” he murmured. “I hope I didn’t cause you alarm?”

“Oh! Not at all.” She said softly. “I was not even vaguely alarmed.” Her cheeks heated as she said that, and she looked at the stone terrace. Her heart was thudding. He was still close – his body an arm’s length away. She looked up into his eyes and longed to kiss him again.

“We should go inside,” he murmured. “The next dance is starting.”

“Yes,” Sophia said softly. “We should go in.”

He walked with her and they slipped in through the big doors to join the party. Sophia felt flushed with sudden warmth as they entered the room, the heat seeming strong after their time outside. She looked up at the ceiling, where the candles still burned brightly. She glanced about, spotting Lettie and Culver still dancing. She felt a flush of warmth. The whole room seemed beautiful and she felt love for everyone in it. Especially Luke. She looked up at him, shyly.

“Shall we find somewhere to sit?”

“Yes, let’s sit,” he agreed. “Though I would dearly like to dance once more.”

“Me too,” Sophia whispered.

They danced again, and then another dance. When Lady Oldham clapped her hands, announcing that it was time for the dinner-party to commence, Sophia followed Mr. Beaumont into the dining-room, heart soaring.

“What think you of the food?” Mr. Beaumont murmured into her ear. They were sitting side by side. The first course – a soup of peas and carrots – was deliciously fragrant and sweet-tasting. She raised a brow.

“Excellent,” she whispered.

“It is indeed,” Luke agreed. “Better than the inn, that’s for sure. I wish

there was somewhere nicer near the bookshop." He chuckled.

"Perhaps there is?" Sophia asked. She was conscious all the time of how close he was when they sat together, her cheeks blushing when she felt his foot touch hers.

"Well, I hope we can discover it together, when we next meet for the quest," Luke replied softly.

Sophia felt her cheeks flush with warmth. He was right! They should meet soon. It was important that they complete the quest together, and soon. She was already hoping to see him the very next day.

After the party, feeling restful with good food and the memories of the evening, she followed Lettie upstairs to her bedchamber. They sat together while Lettie's maid combed out their hair and helped them into long night-shirts.

"Oh, it was such a lovely evening," Sophia sighed, lying down on the chaise-lounge wearily. She would sleep in the guestquarters, but the two of them had such a lot to talk about it seemed only reasonable that they stay together for part of the evening.

"Yes! I saw you dance with Mr. Beaumont. You danced so well!"

"He is an excellent dancer," she murmured, blushing. She recalled the feeling so well – his hand in her waist, his fingers closing about her own.

“I am sure he says the same. Of you, I mean,” Lettie giggled.

They both laughed.

“I saw you dancing with Culver,” Sophia said softly.

“Yes! We danced so much! My toes hurt,” Lettie exclaimed.

Sophia giggled. She could imagine that. He own toes felt deliciously warm, still wrapped in her silk stockings and resting by the fire. She looked up, watching Lettie’s maid brushing out her hair, the long silken tide of it hanging around her shoulders, a slight curl brought out by the warm air around them.

“I suppose I should retire to bed soon,” Sophia said, stifling a yawn.

“Yes, you should!” Lettie agreed, grinning. “You must be tired! Go and sleep, dear friend. And we can see each other over breakfast and talk as much as we like! I am so pleased you stayed.”

“I am pleased, too,” Sophia said warmly. She wrapped a long robe about herself and hurried to her bedchamber, which was just across the hallway.

When she slipped under the coverlet, she was surprised that sleep didn’t come to her immediately. It wasn’t just the newness of the surroundings, or the excitement of the night’s events. Her mind kept

on returning to what Mr. Beaumont had said, again and again. He was planning to ask for permission to court her.

“What would Papa have said?” she asked the darkness aloud. The single candle she’d left burning flickered and glowed, brightening and narrowing with the gentle current of air somewhere in the room. She wondered what he would have thought of her courting Mr. Beaumont. She supposed that, maybe somehow, the quest would give them an answer.

She fell asleep soon after, thinking of the quest. She wanted to find out what would happen next in the long set of clues.

Chapter 28

Luke slumped back in his chair. He was exhausted, and also delighted. He had just spent the most beautiful few hours he could recall in his life, dancing with the woman who had utterly delighted him. He had never thought he would feel like this.

He ran his hand through his hair, recalling every moment of the evening – her slim waist under his hand, her lips pressing to his, his body pressed against her as he held her close, feeling her heart pounding softly through her gown.

That's quite enough.

He blushed red. He shouldn't be imagining those things – holding Sophia in his arms in bed, her body against his, her lips clasped on his. He distracted himself deliberately, reaching for the book on the table, noting every detail of the smooth and cold gold-edged pages, the leather cover under his fingers, so soft. He let out a sigh.

He wasn't doing much better trying to distract himself. A better plan would be to think about how he could make it possible to have her in his life.

"The house would be a good place to start…you have to be able to see that this isn't appropriate for her."

He looked up at the threadbare walls, the cheapest wallpaper covering poor-laid plaster, the ill-fitting window. He couldn't bring a fine lady

to this place, and that was clear to him.

He knew there was only one thing to do, and he rolled up his sleeves and did it.

“Mr. Kenley?”

“Yes, Sir?”

“Send for my brother. I have written to him, and he’ll know why I need to speak with him. But send a message – now if you please. Post-haste. We need to talk as soon as possible.”

“Yes, Sir. Now.” The fellow’s eyes widened. It was late at night, practically midnight. But it would just be possible to get a message sent to Averley Manor. It wasn’t too far from London, and messengers could be induced to leave any time – for substantial pay.

Luke closed his eyes a moment. He had been putting this off for weeks. He knew that there was no other way. He owed it to Sophia. He wanted to provide for her. And only by speaking to Epsom could he do that. He dug in his pocket for a coin to pay the postage.

“Thank you, Mr. Kenley.”

He shut the door. He knew it was late. He was sure Kenley would manage to get the letter on its way somehow. And the estate was not that far from London – were he fortunate enough to get a fast rider, he

could meet with Epsom the very next morning.

When he was in bed, he drew the coverlet up over his head. If he thought about meeting Epsom after all these years, he'd never get to sleep, and that would do no good – he needed rest if he was going to have his wits about him. He was not going to let himself dwell on Epsom. He let himself think back on the previous evening instead. The recollections of the ball were too beautiful – Lady Sophia in her lovely brown gown, her pale skin touched with the light of a hundred candles. He loved her so much! He fell asleep thinking of her beautiful grin as she looked up.

"Luke!" a voice yelled through the door, joyful and loud, heedless of his slumber.

"What?" Luke jumped up to sitting, opening his eyes. Thoughts of Sophia dancing, held tight against him, slipped away, and he slitted his eyes against the bright light of morning falling in through the opened curtains.

"Luke! It's Gilbert!" Gilbert shouted through the thin wood of the door. He sounded happy. "I came to see you! I *had* to talk about the ball. I had a wonderful time. What of you?"

"Dash it…I'm not dressed, Gilbert," Luke shouted through the door. "Come in," he added with a grumbling tone, slipping out of bed. He was wearing his nightshirt, and Gilbert had seen him wearing fewer clothes many times when they got ready together at Cambridge. He might as well let him come in and stop shouting at him through the door.

"Sorry, Luke," Gilbert said, "I just thought I'd come and see you and

take breakfast with you. I brought breakfast," he added with a grin as he walked over and leaned on the wall by the window. "I don't think I could survive your cook's fried eggs. No…a bun for each of us," he chuckled.

"Gilbert…a *Chelsea bun*? For *breakfast*?" The raisin-packed buns were sugary and sweet and the size of his outstretched hand.

"Yes," Gilbert blinked, as if that was completely acceptable. "I always have a Chelsea bun. Or a sandwich. Why ever not?"

"As you like."

Luke couldn't quite imagine anything like that as a breakfast dish, but he ought to have known Gilbert would suggest something like that. He was legendary for his appetite, and he didn't seem to care too much about acceptable customs.

Gilbert leaned against the door, looking out of the window onto the street below. His joyful face had assumed a pensive expression, and he looked down thoughtfully as he watched people walking about in the street. Luke could hear the noise of carts and shouting and strained to hear Gilbert's almost-whispered sentences.

"Luke…I no longer own my heart. Amelia has it. I can do nothing about it."

Luke had to incline his head. He could understand. He felt exactly the same way. He could not imagine a world where he didn't see Sophia's sweet smile directed at him, her green eyes bright with laughter. He

loved her more than he could imagine. He knew exactly how Gilbert felt.

"Well…I understand," he replied.

"I know," Gilbert said, his smile kind. "I saw you with Lady Sophia. I am so happy for the pair of you."

Luke blushed.

"Well, I'll be happier when I have managed to arrange somewhere more reputable to stay," Luke admitted. He fished his socks out from where they lay in disarray under the wash-table. The place really was quite disgraceful.

"Grand," Gilbert said. He turned to face Luke, leaning his back on the dirty wallpaper. He was standing by the fireplace – somehow he had the gift of making himself at home, no matter whose house he was in. Luke envied that, and his quiet confidence. He could do with it just then.

"Shall we have breakfast?" Luke asked, checking his hair in the lookingglass. If he was going to meet Epsom, he'd better check. He wanted to be as respectable as possible. He didn't really want his brother to know that he hadn't been making much profit.

"Grand! I've been resisting the delicious smell of those buns for the last quarter of an hour. If you hadn't woken up, I'd have eaten it all by myself," Gilbert grinned.

Luke chuckled. “I’ll count myself lucky to have breakfast, then.”

“Capital! Off we go.”

Luke followed Gilbert to the drawing-room. He checked the clock as soon as they were in the drawing-room, its dial easily the cleanest thing in the dilapidated surrounds. It was half-past eight, and he wondered if there had been news from Epsom. He doubted it – the message had probably only just been delivered now. He was surprised when the butler came in, smiling.

“A message for you, Sir. Just arrived.” He went across the room to Luke’s side, nodding warmly to Gilbert, who was halfway through his Chelsea bun already. “It seems to be important. Needs a reply now.”

“Oh?” Luke felt a mix of delight and fear wash through him. He took the letter, hastily cracking open the seal and reading down the neat handwriting on the page.

My dear brother, he read. I was surprised to receive your message, and of course will reply with all speed. I hasten to find out what is the nature of this grave matter which you must discuss with me. If it be convenient, I shall meet with you at ten of the clock this morning. Withstanding problems on the journey, I will receive you at your lodgings at this time. Yours fondly, E. B.

Luke frowned. It was a surprisingly warm-hearted letter. He had not expected that. He had thought Epsom as disapproving as the rest of his family. He folded the letter and looked up at the butler, frowning.

“Is he here?”

“A coachman delivered the message. Said he needs a reply straight away, Sir.”

“I see,” Luke observed. Gilbert was watching him intently, but Luke ignored him. “Tell him I’ll meet him in the coach. Straight away.”

“Yes, Sir. Immediately.”

When he’d gone, Luke hastily finished his tea. In answer to Gilbert’s look, he shrugged.

“Please don’t ask me about it, Gilbert. I’ll tell you if it goes well.”

“As you wish,” Gilbert replied.

Luke hurried upstairs, washing his hands and face in the bowl by the window. He combed his hair back, checked his cravat and then dried his hands, hurrying downstairs. The coach was waiting.

Luke felt his legs tense as he got into it. A man with a thin face and a fine haircut was sitting on the left-hand side. He smelled faintly of pomade and he was impeccably dressed. Luke sat down, uncomfortably aware of his own suit – which was of an old-fashioned cut – and his cravat, which was not cream silk like his brother’s.

“It seems like an age since last I saw you,” Epsom said. His voice was cultured and low. He was looking at Luke with interest, not with judgment, which was a surprise in itself.

“Yes,” Luke said simply. “It’s been a while.”

They sat looking at each other. The coach started moving. Luke felt the rattle and lurch over the London cobbles and enjoyed the sensation, for a moment, of traveling in the earl’s coach. It was warm and comfortable, the surfaces covered with soft leather or padded with velvet. It was quiet inside, the coach seeming a space apart from the bustling commercial street.

“So, you mentioned you needed to discuss something,” Epsom said. The coach was heading in no particular direction, and Luke wondered if he planned to conduct the conversation within it. It was certainly a private sphere. It seemed entirely separate from the world around it.

“Yes,” Luke said, clearing his throat. “Epsom…I’m struggling. And I’ve met a girl. A woman, really. A beautiful woman. She’s an earl’s daughter…used to a better life. I can’t…I can’t take her to my lodgings, Epsom. I can’t afford to keep her in the style to which she is accustomed. Epsom…I feel ashamed to say this to you,” he added quietly.

“You do?” Epsom asked. His voice was unusually low.

“Yes,” Luke said. “Epsom, look at me.”

Epsom looked up. For the first time, Luke could see his eyes. Hazel, piercing, they were troubled and sad.

"Luke…" Epsom said quietly. "When I look at you, I see freedom. I see the courage of conviction that I could never manage.

"What?" Luke whispered. His lips lifted at the corners, amazement filling him. "Epsom…you mean you don't look at me and despise me?"

"Do you despise me?" Epsom asked. "Luke, you were brave. You seized for yourself something I never had. Choice, to follow your own path. I was born to be earl. I never questioned my duty. You…chose your life. I don't know what to think of that but to admire it, and to sometimes wonder if you think of me scornfully."

"Epsom," Luke said softly, "I would never scorn you. Look at you! You're successful, rich, well-loved…" he shook his head. "How could I ever scorn you? Sometimes, I wish I was you."

Epsom chuckled. "Often, I wish I was you. You have bravery I lack."

"You have resilience."

They both grinned. Luke felt his heart fill. He had never, ever in his life, imagined that Epsom would admire him. Of all the men he'd ever met, Epsom was one of the ones he looked up to most. A stern, sensible fellow; somebody who did what was expected. He was reliable, strong and resilient. His brother.

It was almost too much for his poor brain to cope with.

They both looked at each other. Epsom reached behind himself, adjusting a pillow. He grinned. “Luke…I am so glad you decided to meet with me today.”

“That’s nothing, when I think of how grateful I am to have met with you.”

They both looked at each other a little sheepishly.

“So,” Epsom said as they turned a corner in the coach, grinding to a halt where a watchman was busy trying to clear a way through the congestion for them. “What was it you wanted to ask me for?”

“An increased allowance,” Luke admitted. “Just for a year or two, until I manage to make the bookshop truly profitable.”

“And…you have plans to make it so?” Epsom asked. He sounded interested. He reached for a lace-edged handkerchief, dabbing at his nose.

“I do,” Luke admitted. “Though mainly, my idea is to start investing my profits in shipping. The world is so full of profitable venture, Epsom!” he exclaimed. “I meet so many people through my bookshop; so many interesting people come in there, and so many of them have bright ideas. Why, only the other day, I met a fellow starting to import

rope. You wouldn't think so, but there's so much to make from it."

"I see," Epsom said. He sounded thoughtful.

"Yes! And I often think that, if I don't know how to make a profitable venture, well, hundreds of London men have brilliant ideas, but not the money to complete them. What if I were to invest some cash, and help them to profit? I would benefit too in the end, as much as they. Everybody benefits."

"Yes, I see," Epsom repeated. Luke thought that he sounded disinterested, but when he looked up, Epsom was staring. He was looking out of the window, but Luke knew him well enough to recognize that his elder brother was really thinking hard.

"So, what do you think?" Luke asked. They had gone past the park, and were heading up the street that led towards the poorer district. Luke was starting to wonder where they were going, if anywhere. Epsom had yet to answer him.

"Sorry?" Epsom blinked. Luke had barely noticed him blink in all the time that he'd been sitting still. He wondered what Epsom had been thinking. "Luke, I have a thought. You don't have to agree, of course… but if you like the idea, then you are welcome to say so."

"Yes, I shall," Luke said, grinning. "What's the idea?"

"Well, what I thought was that I can increase your allowance by a hundred pounds a year. In return, I would like you to suggest certain investments that we could support using the income from the estate.

Not all of it, of course – we could set aside a fraction, say eleven or twelve percent – for you to invest each year. The dividends will go back to the estate, but as the profit increases, I would be prepared to raise your allowance by a percentage every year. Both benefit."

"That sounds brilliant!" Luke exclaimed. "Epsom, that's a grand idea!"

"Thank you. I can have them sometimes."

They both laughed. Luke felt his heart thumping. With an extra hundred pounds a year, he could afford more servants, better lodging, better food….it was exactly what he longed for! And, with Epsom's venture, a hundred pounds would only be the start! He was excited.

"Epsom," he said as the coach turned around in a wide street, "I cannot thank you enough."

"And I cannot thank you enough, either, Luke. You have always showed me that it's possible to reach beyond the confines of society and touch your dreams. And now, with you, I am prepared to make our dreams a reality. You and I can profit, Luke. We are going to become investors. Wealthy ones! We can have a hand in this transformation of society. I would never have been able to do this were it not for your courage."

"And I would never have been able to do it without your resilience," Luke grinned.

To his surprise, his brother extended a hand. "We have an accord?"

“Yes,” Luke agreed, surprised by the lump of emotion in his throat. “We are in agreement.”

“Grand,” Epsom agreed. “Now, since we’re in town, I might as well visit Mr. Stowe, our accountant. It’s a task I don’t like to do more than twice a year, but I suppose I might as well. Shall I let you off outside the office?”

Luke gave him a fond look in return. “That would be grand.”

When he waved to his brother, watching his fine-clad figure get out of the coach, one arm extended in a wave, he could barely believe what had happened. A hundred pounds! He could imagine how much better he could live with that –they could have a proper place to stay, and he could conceivably take on an extra cook, to save his guests from the worst of his employee.

The first thing he thought of, as he ran up the steps towards his lodging, was how much he longed to get to the bookshop and tell Sophia about it.

Chapter 29

Sophia tiptoed into the shop. The bell went off, alerting Luke to her presence. He looked up and the joy in his eyes melted her inside. He beckoned to her.

“Come in, Sophia,” he said gently.

She followed him in. Jane was walking beside her, and peeled off to sit on the seat in the corner that had become her vantage-point. From there, she could watch everything going on in the street.

“Luke,” Sophia said as he took her hands and looked into her eyes, “it’s lovely to see you.”

“And you,” he said.

It felt strange; as if somehow a little mist had gathered around them, shutting them out from the town. It was only them, the only light she could see the soft glow of his eyes. She rested her hand on his arm. He touched her shoulder.

“Sophia,” he said again.

“Luke.”

They smiled at each other, delighting simply in saying each other's names. They just stood there, staring into each other's eyes, for an interminable amount of time.

"I thought I…" he began.

"It is so…" she interrupted, then stopped, blushing.

"You first," she said. He shook his head.

"I wasn't going to say anything. Just that I thought I should tell you that I am not quite as disreputable as I was before. I have requested an increase of my allowance, in exchange for my taking over some of the family investing choices."

"What?" Sophia stared. "Luke…you did that because…"

"Because I wanted to be able to provide something," Luke said carefully.

Sophia felt confused. "But, Luke…I thought you and your family…"

"Didn't talk. Yes," Luke agreed. "We didn't. But just lately, so many things have happened to make me see things differently. I have learned that duty is not love's companion, but an enemy. The only reason to do something is from care or love. And so, I needn't take on responsibilities for my family if they are not something I care about.

I'm quite happy to help my brother with investments. But I won't help with the family's mills, since I don't agree with anything that could exploit people."

"Luke!" Sophia giggled. "Luke! But this is wonderful! You are also on the quest!"

"Yes," Luke said gently, and rested a hand on her shoulder, looking into her eyes. He was now standing facing her, the touch of both hands warm where his fingers rested against her neck. "I have benefited a great deal. Not to say that I have only benefited by learning." He grinned.

"No…" Sophia blushed, understanding his meaning. "I have benefited a great deal by spending time with you," she whispered. She felt her face burning. How could she say something like that so openly? She was glad her chaperone seemed absorbed in whatever she could see in the street near them.

"My dearest, sweetest lady," he whispered. His hand stroked her neck. Sophia felt her body tingle and spark and she looked into his eyes, knowing that she wanted something; wanted to feel his lips tasting hers once more.

"Luke," she murmured. "We should read the book," she gestured at the table. He smiled and reached for it. He lifted his finger and she missed the touch on her neck. She looked over at the desk. "Jane is watching us."

"Yes, I suppose so," Luke agreed, grinning. "I trust that before long – though I suppose I'll have to wait a month to make it decent – I will be able to ask for permission to court you."

“Yes,” Sophia whispered. She felt her heart thump. She couldn’t quite believe that he was going to do this; that he had even contacted his brother to arrange matters.

He must care for her a lot, she thought. She grinned inwardly. How had she not noticed that? She had been so blind to his affections, and also blind to her own!

“Now,” he said softly, “let’s look at these clues. Where were we?” He lifted the book and held it against his chest, a frown on his brow.

“At page forty-five, I think,” Sophia said, taking it from his fingertips. She flipped through the pages, feeling sad that soon they might stop finding clues. The little book by Rumi had become part of their lives. She would want to always have it, as a reminder of her father and the special clues he left her.

“Ah, yes.” Luke said. He bent forward and looked across as she underlined the words from the last clue with a fingertip.

“Well, then,” she said to him with a smile. “I think we can move on to the next page.”

“Yes,” Luke said.

Neither of them moved. It seemed as if they were both reluctant to turn the page; both sensing that the number of clues was becoming

less.

“Did you visit the park?” Luke asked, changing the subject. “I mean, between the last time we met and the ball we attended? It looked particularly splendid the other day in the rain.”

“No,” Sophia giggled, “I wasn’t there. Why were you in the park in the rain – getting cold?”

He chuckled. “No, as it was, I didn’t catch a cold, though that’s more because of luck. No – I happened to be in the park when it started raining. Unpredictable rain.” He shrugged, laughing at himself.

“Well, that’s understandable,” Sophia agreed. “What was it that day that was so beautiful?”

“Well, the rain.” He laughed. “Silly, isn’t it, but I love the rain. There’s something really beautiful about it. The sound it makes, dripping on the roof; the way it clings on leaves like tiny jewels, making of even the most ordinary thing a cavern of priceless gemstones.” His voice was soft.

“Oh, that’s lovely,” Sophia whispered. “I had never thought about the rain in such a way before. That is absolutely quite beautiful.”

He grinned. “I never thought like that before I met you,” he agreed. “Now, I see beauty everywhere because my heart is full of it.”

Sophia felt tears in her eyes. She knew what he meant. “I feel the same,” she said softly. Since meeting him and falling in love, she had seen beauty everywhere too. Some simple scene, which before had been ordinary and even a little dull, was suddenly a magical vision, full of wonder.

“Well, then,” he said with a grin, “I suppose that we should start reading this book. We still have a clue to discover.”

“Yes,” Sophia murmured. “We ought to see what happens next.”

She felt reluctant to open the book, as if they had learned all they could and as if somehow, by completing the set of clues, she removed her excuse to be here with him. Though she had decided absolutely and irrevocably that she could not allow her mother to force her into a relationship with anyone, she still felt as if she was digressing by being here; a feeling she couldn’t force down.

Her father’s quest gave her some sort of legitimacy – she could hide her love behind the fact that she was doing as he wished. Without the quest, she felt as though her mother’s cold indifference could blast away any right she had to love.

“Let’s have a look at the next clue,” Sophia murmured, turning the page. She looked down, following the clue to the next one. “Page fifty-seven and fifty-eight.”

Flipping the smooth pages lightly with a finger, she turned to the correct place. As she did so, she heard Jane stand up. The door swung open. Sophia turned around.

“You!” a voice cried out, loud and insistent. “I found you! I saw you and your foul intrigue! I heard you were in London, and this is how you spend your time – fraternizing with a nobody!”

“Lord Cull!” Sophia cried. There was real fear in her voice. She turned around to look up at him. His face was twisted, angry. She had been afraid of him before, but it was nothing compared to how she felt about him now. She took a step back. “Please…leave this place,” she stammered.

“Lord Cull!” Luke’s voice was not loud, but firm. “Lady Sophia is here in accordance with her father’s desires. He wrote that she should come here.” He stepped between them, standing in front of the desk. Sophia turned to him gratefully, heart pounding.

“You liar,” Lord Cull addressed Sophia again. “You came here to plot your foul intrigue. Your mother will be furious! You have betrayed her wishes.”

“No,” Sophia whispered. “Please, no.”

It was too much. She had thought herself reconciled with her mother’s interference. She had thought herself ready to address matters; to go to her mother with a clear heart and confess about Luke. But now, hearing this man spit her worst fears at her, she recoiled.

“No,” she said again, louder this time.

Without thinking, she turned around and ran into the street.

She heard Luke cry out, but Lord Cull shouted back. Sophia was terrified. She ran in front of a horse, who reared in alarm. She couldn't stop. Her heart pumping, fear giving wings to her feet, she ran down the street and into an alley. She could hear somebody chasing her, and she was sure it was Lord Cull running after her again, seeking to exact some vengeance.

She ran and ran, until she ran down another alley and she realized she was lost. Then she stopped running, seeing half a dozen eyes focused on her as three men – dressed in tattered clothes, grimy and drunk – looked up at her, and none of them were smiling at her.

Chapter 30

“Unhand me at once, if you please!” the man Luke was holding by the cravat demanded. “I am a noble man!”

“I don’t give a damn who you are, Sir,” Luke shouted, facing the stranger, who blocked the door. “I need to find Lady Sophia. At once.” He was full of his fear for her and his terror gave strength to his voice, demanding to leave.

“I am the Marquess of Cull, Sir,” the man said, as if that should mean something, “and I demand that you face me at dawn.” His eyes narrowed.

“*You*…are challenging *me*…to a duel?” Luke stared. For all that Luke had been out of practice for years, he had a reputation with sword and fists that was quite appreciated. Or at least, it had been when he was known in society. And besides, why was he challenging him?

“Yes. You have sullied the reputation of Lady Sophia. Whatever I think of her now, I have to obey societal dictate.” He sniffed. His manner was aloof, totally at odds with the fact that, mere seconds ago, they had been grappling fiercely.

“You would risk your life, for that?” Luke exclaimed, utterly astonished.

“What else is there to live for?” Lord Cull asked. He stepped in front of Luke, blocking the door and the street and his way to rescuing her.

“All that matters is our reputation. Why else do we exist?”

“For love,” Luke said. And with that, he drew back his fist and punched Lord Cull, straight in the chest.

“What in…?” the fellow shouted, but then he doubled over, coughing. Luke ran. He had not a second to spare on the man or his ranting. He had to find Sophia! He had to find her now. Any second in the street was too long.

Luke was already running down the street. He heard the Marquess shout, saw the fellow standing in the door, and Jane, who had also stood and was confronting the fellow herself. Luke turned away. He ran.

“Where did she go? Where would she have gone?” he asked aloud.

He was starting to realize the futility of his attempt. London was huge. How was he going to find one young lady, lost and alone in the warren-like streets? He could spend all day searching and find nothing, especially since she was unlikely to stay put.

“What are you doing, young Sir?” a woman shouted. She was trying to push a barrow past him on the pavement, where he had taken root, searching around.

“Did you see a young lady?” Luke demanded, suddenly getting inspired by an idea. “She was wearing blue, and she had no bonnet. Her hair is brown.”

“A young lady?” The woman frowned as if he had gone soft in the head. “Could have. There’s plenty of young ladies in London, Sir,” she added, chuckling lightly.

“I know!” Luke agreed. “She was running. Like she was frightened. Did anyone see her?” he shouted.

Several people stopped to turn around. The woman scratched her head.

“I saw a person run this way about, maybe less than a minute ago,” she agreed. “Could have been wearing blue…might have been black; couldn’t tell.”

“Thank you!” Luke said. “Which way did she go?”

“That way,” the woman said, pointing in the direction of an alley.

“Thank you!” Luke said, nodding in appreciation. His heart soared. He had a chance! He set off, following the direction the woman indicated, running, lest he be too late.

He knew what London was like, and how much danger she could be in right now.

He inquired from several people if they had seen her, and was

directed down the alley, across another street, and down another alley. Here, he stopped. The houses gave way to old, abandoned buildings, the windows broken, the thatch falling down. This was the sort of place where criminal bands were like to hide. He strained his eyes, looking into the dark ahead of him in the narrow alleyway.

He made out a shape. Tall and stiff-backed. As he narrowed his eyes, he saw two or three other shapes, and also that the figure with their back to him had long, brown hair, the colour of cocoa.

“Sophia!” he yelled. Without thinking, without stopping to draw breath, he ran at the men who had surrounded her, swinging punches and yelling at the top of his voice. “Get away! Or I swear, I’ll call the watchmen. Leave her alone!”

He felt bone crack under his fist, and blood ran down his knuckles – his own blood. One of the assailants reeled back, and another kicked him savagely from behind.

“Luke!” Sophia was shouting. Her voice came from a long distance, it seemed. “Luke! Watch out!”

He felt a punch in the back and gasped, his leg giving way under him. He was falling, and then, as another fellow ran at him, he grabbed a hold of him and the two of them tumbled backwards, Luke snarling as he fell, clawing for the fellow’s eyes. He managed to regain his footing, and delivered a savage kick to his assailant.

That left him with two down, and one still fighting.

“Luke! Watch out!” Sophia yelled again. She was standing at the head of the alley. Luke shouted again, trying to raise his voice to call for help.

“Watch! Watchmen! Help us!”

The fellow before him – standing between himself and Sophia – grunted and threw himself at Luke, who danced out of the way. The fellow landed full-length on the ground, then, as Luke turned and ran, he heard him getting up.

“Sophia!” Luke shouted, running towards her. “Run down the alley!”

“Luke!” she shouted. “There’s one of them behind you.”

Luke turned, just in time to see the fellow running hard towards them. He stepped aside at the last second, grabbed Sophia, and the fellow ran headlong and slipped on the cobbles.

“Run!” Luke yelled. With Sophia holding his hand, they both ran up the alley, into the street, and down another alley, back towards the bookshop. At the end of the second alley, they stopped. Luke was breathing hard, the taste of blood strong in his mouth. He doubled over, coughing hard.

“Luke,” Sophia whispered. “You saved me. I ran too far, and those men…”

“You saved me, too,” he said with a grin. He stood up, resting his hands on her shoulders. He looked into her eyes and saw tears there.

“Luke,” she said softly, “you came after me. You helped me. You were there when I was all alone. You caught me when I was falling.”

“And you did the same for me,” he said softly. He reached up and wiped a strand of hair from her brow. She was crying, tears of fright running down her cheeks. He bent forward and kissed her face, tasting the salt on his lips. “I think we have a habit of being there for each other,” he grinned.

“Oh, Luke,” she murmured. She was crying now, tears pouring down her cheeks. He wrapped his arms around her and held her close against him. “Oh, Luke! I was so frightened. I thought that you would think, when you saw that man, that I’d lied and…and…” she stopped speaking, overwhelmed with sobbing.

“Sophia,” he said softly, into her hair. “Sweet Sophia! I love you. I have wanted to tell you this from the moment I saw you, all those weeks ago, when you were running on the estate, the wind in your hair, laughter on your lips. I knew then how much I loved you. I love you, my beautiful, free spirit. I love you with every breath in my body and every beat of my heart. I want to spend my life with you, and I hereby solemnly ask you if you would do me that honour.”

He spoke without thought, but knew that his deepest soul desired that; that he had wanted to say that for weeks and he had not had the courage. Now, in this moment, with her held close in his arms and the warmth of her face at his neck and her arms wrapped around him, he knew that he could say what was in his heart.

“Luke!” she said. She was laughing, but it was a surprised, delighted sound. “Luke! You…you mean that…that you…” she said, and she was grinning, her smile wide, even as tears rolled down her cheeks.

“Yes,” he said, laughing too, though he was also crying, silent tears of joy. “That was a proposal.” He grinned, “I suppose it was a little confusing.”

“No!” Sophia chuckled, wrapping her arms around him and holding him tight. He could feel her sobs, though she was still laughing as well, her voice tight. “Oh, Luke! Yes. I say yes to you. I want to spend the rest of my life with you.”

Luke looked at her. He was overwhelmed. Very tenderly, he rested his hand on her hair, stroking it. He could barely believe what she’d said, what he’d heard. She wanted him? She wanted to spend the rest of her life with him? Just for himself?

“Well, then,” he said a little shakily, “I don’t know what to do now.”

She giggled. Stepping back, she rested a hand on his shoulder.

“Well, by all accounts, I reckon the first thing we should do is to get out of this street and find our way to the bookshop.”

Luke put his head on one side. “Yes. I think we should.”

They both laughed as, arm in arm, they walked, stiffly, down the

street. Now that his muscles were colder, Luke was aware that he was quite injured. His leg hurt, and something in his back ached terribly. His hand was throbbing as well, quite painfully. He walked hunched over, the two of them supporting each other as they walked. They found their way back to the bookshop.

As Luke had suspected, the Marquess had left. He was also pleased to see Jane was there. He waved to her as she clapped delightedly.

“Lady Sophia! You’re here! You’re safe.”

“Yes, Jane,” Sophia said gently. Her tears sparkled on her eyelashes, like soft rain. She looked at her fondly. “I’m safe. But Luke is hurt.”

“Oh! My Lady! Let’s get him back to the house, then. And we’ll send for the physician at once.”

“Back to the house?” Sophia asked. She echoed the question that was in Luke’s mind. He was really being invited back to her house, in spite of the scandal of her receiving a gentleman alone?

Jane shrugged, “I’m there, and that should count for something.”

Laughing, Sophia took her hand. “Thank you, Jane,” she said. “I’m so lucky to have you! Now. Let’s get Mr. Beaumont back to the house. Shall we try to alert one of the passing coaches?”

“Yes, Lady Sophia.”

Sophia held Luke's arm and, slowly, she helped him to a chair. Luke was starting to feel lightheaded, and he was aware of a terrible pain in his hand. He wondered if he'd broken his finger. It had been years since he'd boxed, but apparently he could still do it.

Sophia held his hand – the uninjured one – and they waited while Jane hailed a coach. Then, carefully, they supported each other on the way out into the street.

Luke and Sophia got in together, somewhat clumsily, and landed in a tangle on the seat. Luke grinned and shut his eyes, wishing that he was conscious enough to enjoy the feeling of Sophia held close in his arms, sitting beside him in the coach. But his mind was drifting, the pain of his injuries making him feel lightheaded and weak.

"Almost there," Jane commented calmly.

The coach drew up and Sophia helped him out. They walked slowly up the stairs together and into the house.

"Can you manage to reach the drawing-room, Luke?" Sophia asked gently.

"For you, My Lady?" Luke asked, grinning. "I'll certainly give it my best attempt."

Sophia giggled, and the two of them went up to the drawing-room

together. Luke felt the warm velvet of the chaise-lounge under his skin and held Sophia's hand in his own and he looked up into her eyes, feeling completely happy.

Chapter 31

Sophia sat in the drawing-room, her heart pounding. Luke was sleeping in the guest-quarters, in her house! Or, rather, he was resting while the physician attended to his injured hand. She could barely believe it! He was here.

She felt a grin lift her lips. It had been the most wonderful day. She would never have imagined anything like this was possible. What lay on the other side of the prison of duty, the conditions placed on love, she had never even contemplated.

Now, she knew. On the other side of duty lay the untamed, unfettered green fields of love. And now that she had walked there, she would never confuse the two of them again.

“My Lady?” a voice said from the hallway.

“Yes?”

A grave-looking man with tired-looking eyes bowed to her. “My Lady, I have set the bones in the finger. His back is severely bruised, but there is nothing broken. I prescribe bedrest and three good meals a day. And try to keep him moving; even if just from one end of the room to the other. It will help him heal.”

“Yes. Thank you, Mr. Rowlinson. I will.”

The physician turned towards the door, taking his leave. Sophia went straight up to the bedroom.

“Luke?” she whispered through the door. He turned his head and looked at her, his eyes tired. He looked at her with a fond look and she went in, walking quietly, and took his hand. He looked up at her, still smiling.

“The physician just left,” he said. He indicated his hand, which was swathed in bandages, lying immobile on the coverlet on his right side. Sophia gave him a considering look.

“Yes. He prescribed bed-rest and three good meals.” She grinned, “Which reminds me. Are you hungry?”

“Hungry?” Luke raised a brow. “I rather think I am. My Lady, I am grateful to be here.”

“Nonsense, Luke,” Sophia said softly, “I am pleased you’re here. Now, I’ll send for the butler. He can see what can be found for dinner.”

“Thank you, Sophia,” Luke said gently. He squeezed her hand. She felt her heart pounding. Here he was, in her house!

She felt so happy.

In the drawing-room, she found Jane. She was sitting with her

embroidery, quite calmly, as if nothing had happened. Sophia went to sit down, reaching for a book. She couldn't read. She couldn't stop thinking of Luke. She knew she should leave him to eat and rest – at least for a while – but she wanted to spend every second with him.

"So, the physician cleaned him up, then?" Jane asked warmly, still working on the embroidery. She was doing cuffs now, patterning the fabric with a design of little shapes.

"Yes, he did," Sophia agreed. "Jane…will it really be all right that he's staying here?" she asked. Now that she had a moment to think, doubt beset her.

"Of course, it is," Jane said calmly. "After all, you and he are, well… you're courting, aren't you?" she asked. "And I'm here, and that makes it quite all right."

"Jane!" Sophia blushed. "How did you know? I mean…" she grinned, astonished at the woman's knowledge.

Jane lifted a shoulder. "I was a young lass once, and I know you. It was easy. I guessed the moment I saw your face."

"You still are young, Jane," Sophia teased. "I'm so happy."

"I know," Jane said gently. "And I am happy too. Now, shall we have some tea? You need to eat too. And mayhap I should send for some hot water?"

“A bath! Oh!” Sophia shut her eyes, rapturously. “Yes, please. That would be wonderful.”

After tea, Sophia found her mind returning to Lord Cull. She was not going to worry about him, she thought sleepily. She knew that it would all find a solution. What could he do, anyway? Aside from her mother’s persuasion, he had no formal right to her at all. He could say nothing about her behavior. Especially not now.

She felt her heart fill with warmth. She was not going to allow that fellow to spoil things; not for a second.

She wrapped her bathrobe tight around her, lying back on the bed sleepily. Thoughts of Luke flooded her mind. She blushed. He was here, in the house, not ten paces away from where she lay, now. The thought made the blood flush her face, her heart filling with warmth.

“Stop it, Sophia,” she told herself, happily.

She could barely believe that, tomorrow, she would take all her meals with him, having him in the house all day.

At dinnertime, she went up to Luke’s chamber. She tiptoed to the door, knocking gently, face flushed. Was he still awake? She blushed at the thought of herself standing out here, waiting to go into a room where Luke lay.

He called her from inside, and she opened the door, cheeks red, and tiptoed in.

“Luke,” she said, smiling, “I came to see how you were. Shall we take dinner, do you think?”

“I would like that. You have a dinner-dress on,” he said, raising a brow.

“Yes,” Sophia blushed. “You noticed.”

He chuckled. “Sophia, my sweetheart, you look beautiful in everything you wear. And that is a very fetching gown.”

“Thank you,” Sophia murmured. She felt her cheeks burning. He liked it! She flushed, sitting down on the chair beside his bed. Her palms were damp, her heart racing fast.

“I think I might even be able to get out of bed,” he said, shifting himself against the headboard. Sophia winced, seeing him go pale, sweat on his brow as he struggled up. But she looked at him fondly as he sat up, one brow raised.

“There. I think I can manage that. Is there someone who can help me dress? I think my suit is not too badly ruined after that incident?”

“I think not,” Sophia agreed. She stood, grinning. “I’ll call the butler. I’m sure he can help.”

“Thank you,” Luke said.

She looked into his eyes a moment and then tiptoed from the room, her cheeks red.

Downstairs, they sat and ate a delicious stew together while Luke discussed plans with her.

“I reckon the first thing we should do is to go back to the countryside,” he said. “I don’t trust that fellow and I’m sure he’ll have gone back there, carrying some dangerous nonsense of a story.” He chuckled, “Not that he’ll want to tell such a tale against himself, mind you.”

“No,” Sophia agreed, taking a slice of bread from the centre of the table. “But I think you are right.”

“Yes,” Luke agreed. “And the sooner your mother knows I have asked for your hand, the better. I want to settle matters soon, Sophia. And not because of propriety. I don’t care about that.”

“No,” Sophia giggled. “And neither do I,” she agreed. “Not anymore.”

“I know.”

He took her hand and she looked into his eyes and she knew that when there was such love, and there was something that opposed it,

that thing was flawed. There was nothing that she would ever allow to get between her and this love, for nothing like love would ever do so.

"So," he said, threading his fingers through hers. "Once we have gone back to the country, I reckon we should come back here. And then back to the country again. It'll still be summertime, which is by all accounts a good time for betrothal…and Westford is beautiful at this time of year."

"Luke!" Sophia giggled. "You want to move that fast?"

Luke shrugged. "Why not?" he asked. "I reckon we both would like that."

"Luke!" Sophia giggled. "Oh, Luke…" she shook her head. "I don't give a fig for pomp and the trappings of society. Not anymore. I have seen something more priceless than all the jewels of the Orient. I see it every time I look into your eyes."

Luke went red. "That's very sweet of you, Sophia," he said. His voice was tight. She thought he was also going to cry, though only his eyes grew wet.

"It's not sweet – of course every second with you is more precious than anything else in the world," she said firmly.

He regarded her warmly and she felt her heart melt. She was aware of his closeness – his feet beside hers, his hand resting on hers, the warmth of his body so close she could almost feel it through the blue silk of her gown.

They finished dinner talking about simple, easy things – their day in the park. What they would eat tomorrow. Then, when he stood – carefully, his leg aching – he drew her into his arms.

“I love you, My Lady,” he said, resting his hands on her shoulders, looking into her eyes. “I look forward to seeing you tomorrow.”

“I love you, Sir,” she said, her throat tight with feeling. It was one of the first times she was saying it, and it felt wonderful and strange to say it.

He bent forward and, very gently, kissed her lips. She sighed, leaning against him, her body melting against his.

She could not sleep for a long while that night, her thoughts returning to that moment in the dining-room, with the two of them alone, his lips pressed to hers, and his arms tight around her.

Chapter 32

Luke sat up in bed. He took a moment to study his surroundings, confused at first about where he was. He could feel warmth – which was in itself a nice change. He was under a soft coverlet and he could see soft filtered light falling through the curtains. He could hear the crackle of a fire, and smell the scents of pinewood and a delicious floral smell that he thought must be scenting the laundry.

“And this morning, I have somewhere to go.”

He grinned to himself, rolling over and slipping out of the bed. He would have breakfast with sweet Sophia, and then he would be off to the countryside. Traveling to Westford, to discuss matters with her mother.

He was surprised that he didn’t feel nervous.

He stood up, wincing as he pressed on his right hand. It was broken – or, one of the fingers was broken, the bone set neatly and bandaged in position. He hoped it would heal quickly. His body still ached from bruises, but he didn’t care. He was off to have breakfast with the woman he loved more than anything in the world.

“Luke!” she said as he walked into the breakfast-room. She stood up. She was wearing a blue dress, but it was slightly lighter blue than the colours he was accustomed to her wearing. He felt his heart soar. He bent over to kiss her cheek.

“Good morning, sweetness,” he said gently. He took her hand in his, feeling her cool skin against his palm and recalling the sweet kiss of the previous night. She smiled and he sat down beside her, acutely aware of his foot beside hers under the table.

She grinned, “Good morning, dearest.”

He went pink. It was the first time she had called him that, and he was surprised by the weight of the response it evoked in him; his face flushing, his body heating up with warmth. He smiled across at her, shyly.

“So,” she said, reaching for a slice of toast and buttering it carefully, “what should we do today?”

“I suppose we ought to pack,” Luke said, also taking a slice of toast, and pouring them both a cup of tea. “And when would you like to depart?”

“I wish we could put it off,” Sophia admitted, grinning. “But shall we depart after breakfast?”

“A little after breakfast,” he said, smiling back. “It would be nice to have some time to explore the house with you.”

Sophia looked happy. “What a fine plan! Yes! That’ll make it so much less frightening. Let’s do that, then!” She clapped her hands.

They finished breakfast together, having a long talk. It delighted Luke how they could talk about anything and everything, and find equal enjoyment in the discussion, whether it was mundane or complex. The butler came in to clear away the dishes and Luke stood, stretching and then wincing as his bruises ached.

"Luke…you will be all right in the coach?" Sophia asked, resting a hand on his shoulder.

"I assuredly will be," Luke said gently. "And then we shall return to London, for the quest."

"Yes," Sophia agreed. She smiled up into his eyes. "I wonder what it is that Father wanted us to find?"

Luke shrugged. "I have no idea," he agreed. He found that, even though the prospect of finding the solution to the quest was exciting, he was far more excited about the thought of waking up and taking breakfast together tomorrow.

They packed separately, and Sophia took Luke through the house – briefly, because there was not much time. She promised him that they would go through it more carefully when they were back. Luke kissed her fondly.

"I would happily explore anywhere with you," he said.

Sophia giggled. "Oh, Luke! I would too…we have such fine adventures together!"

Luke smiled to himself and they went down to the front door.

"The coach awaits, My Lady; Sir," the butler said, bowing low. Luke swallowed hard, feeling nervous. Sophia gripped his hand – his left hand – and he gripped hers gently. They went down the stairs together. The big coach with the Westford coat-of-arms emblazoned on the door was waiting for them. Luke took a deep breath and helped Sophia up. Jane was in there already, waiting for them.

"My Lady! Mr. Beaumont! This is an adventure."

Luke looked excited. "Yes," he said. "It certainly is."

Jane fell asleep soon after the coach started rolling. Sophia was opposite Luke, and he watched her face as the street gave way to the fields and the first glimpse of the countryside. Her eyes lit up and started shining. He tucked that information in the back of his mind – the fact that she loved the open fields and hills so much.

We will need to take time away from the city often.

He had no idea how he was going to do that yet, but he was sure that somehow they would manage it.

The coach rolled on. They stopped at an inn for the night, and then set off again early the next morning, at first light, groggy with sleep and weariness. Luke fell asleep soon after the coach started rolling. He woke up later to the sound of a sharply indrawn breath.

“Not too long now, My Lady, Mr. Beaumont!”

“What?” Luke murmured sleepily. He opened his eyes, discovering to his immense shyness that he had fallen asleep beside Lady Sophia, her head resting on his shoulder, his hand on hers, resting in her lap.

“Luke?” she murmured, opening her eyes. They fluttered open slowly and he felt his heart melt with tenderness as he looked into her gentle, sleepy face. He kissed her cheek.

“We’re almost there,” he murmured back. His fingers clasped on hers and then he moved, gently, so that he was sitting opposite her. Jane was watching them, quite contented, almost as if her job was to guard their closeness, not to prevent it.

“Oh. I see,” Sophia murmured, looking around. “I recognize that tree,” she whispered.

“Yes,” Jane agreed. “The wishing tree. Just outside the village. Almost back.”

“Wishing tree?” Luke asked.

“Oh! You make a wish at the tree, and it comes true,” Sophia said, smiling at him. “I was there when I was a little girl. Father took me there.”

“I see,” Luke murmured. He reckoned that sounded like a good place – if he had a wish, it would be that he could give Sophia the life he wished for her. Complex. He put the thought aside for the moment. The coach rolled on.

When they reached somewhere that Luke recognized, they were almost at the house. The coachman slowed. Luke noticed how Sophia had tensed, her body stiff and her manner nervous. He took her hand, seeking words of assurance.

“We’re together now,” he said gently. “Nothing bad will happen.”

“Oh, Luke,” Sophia said, and kissed his cheek. “I’m so glad you’re with me.”

“Nothing near as glad as I am that you’re with me,” he said gently.

They alighted from the coach. Jane jumped down last, carrying her sewing-basket. Luke took Sophia’s hand, which was cold with nerves, and they walked up the gracious steps together. Luke found that his heart was as steady as ever, his mind calm. He recalled his last visit here, when Charles had received him and he’d first seen Sophia.

No, Charles would not disapprove. He didn’t know why he thought that, but he sensed approval from the older man, as if his spirit still lingered here in his beloved garden and had only blessings for them both.

He took a breath and knocked.

"Enter," the butler said. Then he saw Lady Sophia. "Oh. My Lady! We did not expect you. I…" he paused, looking about awkwardly, as if he was at a loss. Sophia gripped Luke's left hand tightly, and he knew how frightened she was. He felt coldness descend inside him.

"Inform Lady Westford that Lady Sophia is returned, and that she is accompanied by Mr. Luke Beaumont."

"I see. Um, er…yes. Wait here please, Sir." The butler stepped aside and Luke walked in, his hand firm on Sophia's. She was looking around nervously, unable to settle. Jane followed them in.

Luke, Sophia and Jane waited while the butler went upstairs. He came back down again, followed by a tall figure dressed in black. Luke swallowed hard. He'd never actually met Lady Westford before.

"Leave us," she said coldly to the butler. "You too, Braceley," she gestured at Jane. "Sophia. You are back."

Jane stepped into a hallway. The butler exited as quickly as he could. Lady Westford stepped into the entrance way.

Luke felt Sophia's back hunch, her green eyes darting to the floor. Suddenly, she was a frightened child and Luke felt rage like he'd never felt, not even for the thugs in the street.

“Lady Sophia is back, having suffered great hardship in following her father’s wishes,” Luke said. He stared at the woman. She was beautiful, he had to admit, with the same long oval face and wide eyelids as her daughter, but where Sophia’s mouth was tender, hers was set in a hard line, her face gaunt and cold.

“I can see that,” her mother said tightly, “I can see she caused a great deal of trouble.”

“Mama…” Sophia whispered. She was crying. Luke lost all sense of self-control.

“Lady Sophia is the dearest, brightest spirit and you should be honoured she calls you her mother,” he said. His voice was not loud, but it was firm. “She has done no more than what her father wished and, in the course of that time, I have fallen in love with her. If that is trouble, then you have a strange definition. I am here to ask for her hand from you.”

Lady Westford raised her eyes to his face. They were hazel, and completely cold. She looked through him, as if he had not spoken. He felt his own spine stiffen and he understood why Sophia feared her.

“You ask for her hand?” she said. “You have no idea what you have done. Lady Sophia was promised to the Marquess. And you have ruined her reputation. You have no idea at all what danger you have put her in, and how you have wreaked ruin on our entire family!”

“Mama…no,” Sophia whispered. She was still crying, tears pouring down her cheeks. Luke turned and hugged her to himself, ignoring everybody.

“Shh, sweetling,” he said gently. “It will all be well. You’re safe and I’m safe and we’ll all be well. Now, why don’t you go upstairs and change into day-clothes?”

“No, Luke,” Sophia said softly, “I won’t leave.”

“I’ll be fine,” he said, squeezing her hand reassuringly. It was his right hand, but he didn’t mind. He squeezed it anyway. He watched her take a deep breath.

“I’ll go and change, but then I’ll come straight down again,” she promised. She held his fingers tight a moment, and then turned and ran lightly up the steps. He watched her go. Jane, thankfully, went with her. He waited until they were up the steps, then turned to Lady Westford.

“My Lady,” he said coolly, “I am here for your blessing. If you choose not to give it, then it is your choice. But I am not leaving without achieving my objectives one way or another.”

“You would wed my daughter without my permission!” She was no longer cold, but hotly angry. “That is scandalous!”

“And so?” Luke asked. “Society would talk a little about it and it would die down in three days. Why is that so frightening?” He was amazed by how calm he felt. Even when her face transformed into a picture of anger, he felt no fear.

“You…you…” Lady Westford was speechless. “Leave. At once! You are not welcome in this house.”

“I see, yes.” Luke said. “It surprises me, though. I was a good friend of the late earl. I express my sorrow for your loss.”

“Get out,” Lady Westford hissed. “How dare you even speak of him? You have ruined his family! You have condemned his daughter to a life on the edge of society, and me to being shunned, penurious and shameful! I don’t want to even look at you. The Marquess was here, you know – he told me everything.”

“He did?” Luke raised a brow. “His own version of events, I trust. Why do you take his word over your daughter’s?”

“Enough!” she hissed. “You will leave and you will leave now. If you will not go voluntarily, I will have you escorted out.”

Luke shrugged. “You’d better have a good set of guardsmen here, then,” he said lightly, “because I won’t leave unless they carry me bodily from the door. I’m not leaving Sophia here.”

“Mr. Leeson!” Lady Westford called. “Mr. Herrow! Somebody, send for them! I need this man removed from here.”

“Mama?” A voice called on the stairs. Sophia appeared on the stairwell. She was wearing a blue dress, her hair styled under a bonnet for traveling. Her shawl was about her shoulders. She walked down the stairs. Luke felt his heart fill with love and joy for her courageous heart.

“Sophia?” Lady Westford stared. “Sophia! You’re not leaving, are you?”

“Mama…I have no choice,” Sophia said calmly. “I have made my decision and, I believe Father would have approved. I might be wrong, but I find that I am willing to risk that. My heart is with Luke and, in the face of that love, fear is a smouldering ember before the brightness of the sun.”

“Sophia…” Lady Westford said. Sophia stepped past her and went to Luke’s side, her back straight.

“Luke, shall we leave?” she said gently. “I think I rather like the thought of seeing London again.”

Luke felt his heart swell with pride. He took her hand, and they walked to the door. He could hear footsteps behind them, but didn’t turn around to see who it was. From the steps, he heard Lady Westford shout.

“Sophia! Come back here this instant!”

Neither of them turned around. They got into the coach together. Luke helped Sophia up. Jane came with them, hauling herself up beside Luke. When he turned to Sophia, he found that her hands were shaking.

“Luke…” she whispered. “Luke…I can’t believe I did that!” She sniffed, shock making her eyes wide.

“You were wonderful, Sophia, truly. You were so brave. I am inspired by you.”

“Oh, Luke. I am by you, too,” Sophia said softly.

She took his hand and he leaned forward and pressed his lips to hers. He was worried for her – knowing that she would probably be thinking about the incident all day, distressed – but he could not help being full of joy that they were on their way to London together.

Chapter 33

Sophia woke up in the London house, blinking into the cool morning light. She slipped out of bed. Her stomach was tingling with excitement. She was back in London, and she and Luke would soon be wed.

She pulled the bell, summoning Jessie, who had fortunately remained in London during their short return to Westford. Sophia had recovered from the shock of that altercation, and now, after a good night's sleep in her London bed, she was ready to face the morning.

She and Luke would be returning to the bookshop.

She dressed, choosing a pale green gown, and hurried downstairs to breakfast.

"Good morning, Sophia," Luke said, standing. He took her hand and kissed her cheek and Sophia felt warmth flood through her body, delicate and sweet.

"Good morning, dearest," she said. Her eyes sparkled as she looked at him. "We have plans for today."

"We do indeed," Luke agreed. He was dressed in an elegant blue suit – the first thing he'd done when they arrived in London, even though it was late, was to take a coach to his lodgings to get his clothes – and he looked alert and happy.

They shared a quick breakfast of toast, tea and croissants, and then hurried to the street to take a coach to the bookshop.

Stepping back in through the little door with its diamond-paned windows brought a flood of memory back to Sophia. She felt her smile lift her cheeks, and looked at Luke, heart filled with love for him.

“So,” she said, as he looked at her, his eyes bright with a longing that took her breath away. “Here we are, back at the last clue.”

“Yes,” Luke said. They looked at each other. Neither of them sat down. Luke bent to retrieve the tiny book with his left hand, stroking the soft leather front. “Odd…I feel nervous,” he said.

“I too!” Sophia giggled.

They looked at each other, smiling brightly. Then they sat down. Sophia took a deep breath.

“Page fifty-six,” she said, turning to the page of the book. Her eyes were misty as she looked at her father’s familiar writing. So strange, how his words had led them on this quest and, in so doing, had led them to each other. She cleared her throat, struggling to read through eyes full of happy tears. “At the end of Bakerwell Street,” she read, “you will find a certain trader in antiques and curiosities. There, on being admitted, you will find a picture on the back wall, right in the left-hand corner. Go and look at that picture well, and study what is in it. Contained within that gilded frame is all you need know about the treasure. Then you will know its identity.”

Luke rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “Bakerwell Street. An antique dealer. I don’t know of it.”

“Oh, Luke!” Sophia clapped her hands. “Oh, this is so exciting!”

“Yes, it is,” Luke agreed. He looked a little wistful, and Sophia understood why. Finally, they would find the treasure, but that meant the quest would end. It also meant that their life would begin – the one that was theirs.

She took a deep breath. “Let’s go,” she said.

They hailed a coach. Jane went with them, but she seemed reluctant to follow them when they found, and entered, the antique dealers.

“I’ll wait here,” she said, gesturing at the waiting-room in the front. “You two go on ahead.”

“Alright,” Sophia agreed, a little nervous. She wondered what they would find. A picture? She imagined her father would have meant a picture of the landscape, some sign indicating where the treasure was. So typical of him, to leave it obscure until the last moment! She smiled, excitedly.

They went in.

The antique shop was absolutely packed. All manner of things covered the wall, the floor, the counters arranged all around the shop, obscuring the window. The dealer – a friendly older man with white hair and a welcoming air – greeted them.

"We're looking for something particular," Luke explained. "On the back wall, on the left."

"I see! I see," the man said, as if their strange request was entirely acceptable. "Off you go, then. If you need to ask for prices, come and find me and I'll look it up for you. I won't remember."

They all laughed. Sophia looked around, stepping silently on the tiles – candleholders, globes, statuettes, coins, even a pistol or two adorned the walls. Gilded, ornately-carved furniture from another era stood about on the floor, and there were one or two paintings, but mostly small ones of things like flowers or still-lives. She followed Luke to another room, holding her breath.

She was nervous.

"Here we are," Luke murmured. "The back wall. On the left. A painting."

They looked. On the back wall, arranged from top to bottom were two swords, a horn, a set of hooks for hats, a duelling pistol and a mirror. No picture.

Sophia felt sick. Had it been sold, in the time between her father's setting the quest and their following? Had they come all this way, to

find nothing?

“Look,” Luke said gently. “What did the clue say?”

“Within that frame, you will find all you need know of the treasure,” Sophia said softly.

“Within the frame,” Luke said. “The…something frame? Was it gilded – did he say?”

“Yes,” Sophia murmured. She felt downcast. “Yes, I think so.”

“Well, then!” Luke said. “Here it is, then! The picture he wanted us to see.”

Sophia stared. Then, understanding dawning, she stepped up and stood beside Luke as, together, they looked into the mirror.

Their own faces looked back. Luke, with his long, handsome face and those dark eyes she thought were so wonderful, looking at her, his eyes shining with love. Her own face, small and heart-shaped, her lips pink, like her cheeks, her skin and eyes wet with tears. They had their arms around each other, and were looking at each other’s faces, eyes shining.

“This is it!” Sophia said, her heart shining with joy. “This is the treasure! This is what my father wanted us to find.”

“Yes,” Luke whispered. “This is it. He said we were supposed to name it, didn’t he?”

“Yes,” Sophia said. They said the word together.

“Love.”

Sophia turned to Luke and her eyes seemed bright with tears. They were running down her cheeks, her heart full as she turned and looked up at him, joy and wonder filling her. This was the treasure her father wanted her to find! He had wanted her to find Luke, all along!

“Oh, Sophia,” Luke murmured. “Oh…this is the most wonderful day of my life.”

“Oh, Luke,” she said gently. “Yes it is. It certainly is. I love you.”

“I love you too, my sweetest Sophia,” he said. “I love you, and that is the greatest treasure of my life.”

“Yes,” Sophia murmured. “It is. It certainly is.”

They kissed.

Chapter 34

Luke looked out of the window of the coach as it moved past the now-familiar green fields and hillocks. He recognized the countryside well, now. They were close to Westford. He thought he recognized the tree that Sophia and Jane had mentioned on their first visit. He looked across at her.

“We will be there soon,” he said softly.

“Yes,” Sophia agreed.

He took her hand and squeezed it reassuringly, but she didn’t seem afraid. Her eyes shone.

“We will be free to do as we wish, then,” Luke said gently. “And I can’t wait to discover what that will be.”

He had no idea, yet, how he was going to organize matters for Sophia, when they could share a house together. He hadn’t found any accommodation in London that would suit, but he felt oddly confident. He was sure they would be able to arrange matters for themselves.

“Me too, Luke,” Sophia whispered, taking his hand. “I am so excited.”

Luke smiled and leaned back and watched the countryside go past. He

felt contented. They had spent another week and a day in London – shopping, relaxing, and generally just indulging in the diversions the place offered them. Both of them felt freer now – they were going to become respectable. And they were on their way to do just that.

Whether they had obtained Lady Westford's blessing or not.

The coach rolled on and Luke found that he could not wait to be back in London. He would be able to live with Sophia openly, and they would be sharing every aspect of their day together. He felt his heart thump. To be able to touch her, to kiss her, to hold her…he stopped. He could not let himself be distracted by such thoughts! Drawing his gaze from her lips to the coach, he distracted himself and focused on the immediate needs.

"Almost there," Jane murmured. Sometime during the journey, as she always did, she'd woken up just as the coach was halting. Luke found he'd miss her – she'd been a companion of their adventures from the first moment.

"Yes," Sophia agreed. "Soon we shall be able to do as we have wished for so long."

When the coach stopped, Luke jumped down, helping Sophia carefully to the ground. Her hand was firm on his, and she walked up the steps confidently. She was wearing a blue dress – pale blue, one of the palest colours he'd ever seen her in – and her traveling-bonnet was coming loose, settled on loose curls.

He knocked on the door.

“Yes?” the butler asked. He saw Luke and Sophia, and looked frightened. This time, he let them in.

“I shall summon the countess.”

“Yes. Please,” Luke agreed. He stood where he was, back straight. Sophia stood beside him, her arm on his. She was not afraid either, he thought, but looked ahead quite calmly. He recalled a small conversation he’d had with Gilbert, and the information the fellow had managed to uncover for them.

Her ladyship came down the stairs. Her steps were firm; their hollow ring hard and clear-edged. Sophia looked up, but Luke thought she seemed calm and unafraid.

“Good morning,” Luke said, bowing politely. “Lady Westford. I am here again, with the same request.”

“I see,” Lady Westford said thinly. “You don’t give up easily, do you? What shame have you brought on us now?” Her voice was utterly cold.

“Mother…” Sophia murmured, but Luke addressed Lady Westford, quite unafraid. He found that the clear acceptance they had received – in that mysterious way that day in the town – was enough for him.

“No shame, I think. Interestingly, though, I think that your original choice you made for your daughter might have been more dangerous. I might be the second son of an earl, and have no particular rank, but

I am not as sorely in debt as the Marquess. I have it on good authority that the fellow is struggling through a mountain of dues and that he is at risk of losing his property. I think that, on the whole, a moderately-solvent bookshop is more reliable?"

"What?" Lady Westford stared. Her face was a picture of horror. "The Marquess, in debt? Not possible…I think you're lying." Her voice was confident.

"Not lying, My Lady," Luke said calmly. "If you confront him with it, I am sure he will not hide the fact. While he is an odious, cruel man, I think he would be honest to you."

Lady Westford took a deep breath. She regarded him steadily. In that moment, Luke could see the qualities she did share with her daughter – thoughtfulness, keen wit and fortitude. Those qualities were what Charles had admired; he was sure. She certainly never gave up. While Luke himself could not like her, and he hated how she had treated Sophia, how fearful she had made her, he had to admire those qualities. She cleared her throat and began to talk.

"You know…strangely, and it really *is* strange, but I believe you," Lady Westford said. "There was something not quite trustworthy about the Marquess. I will accept your word about the debts. Now. You will never redeem yourself from what you did, but I confess I am not entirely angry. I am not angry because I can see what you have done for my daughter. In the last two days, I have thought a great deal. I have thought long and hard about myself and I am not proud of my actions. The other day, when you were here, I saw another side to Sophia – one I have not seen for many years. In that moment, I saw her father's quiet strength in her face, and I knew that I had been wrong in what I did – in what I have done to her over the years. Please, forgive me."

Luke looked at Sophia. Her eyes were wide. She was looking at her mother with complete disbelief.

"Mother…" she murmured. "You really *mean* that?"

Lady Westford looked at her daughter and, in that moment, Luke knew neither of them were even aware he was there. He watched the proud woman incline her head.

"Yes," she said clearly. "I was wrong. I am aware of that now. I thought only of myself. I considered only how you could help me to further myself, my needs and what I wished. I didn't think of you. I am sorry, now, for what I did."

"Thank you," Sophia whispered.

Luke watched as Lady Westford bowed her head, and he thought that he saw tears sparkle in her eyes. She took a moment to compose herself, and then turned to Luke.

"I don't know what I think of you," she said slowly. "But I cannot refuse you what you seek. You have my permission."

Luke swallowed. "Thank you," he said.

Sophia glanced at him and Luke looked into her eyes, trying to give reassurance and strength back. He came over to stand beside her, slipping his hand into hers.

“We will go now,” Luke said to Lady Westford. “I thank you for your blessing.”

She inclined her head. “As you say,” she said thinly. Luke was sure she was uncertain what to say – she wasn’t going to give them anything, but nor was she going to put herself in a bad light by showing any anger in front of them or in front of Jane, who was nearby, just within earshot.

Luke bowed politely, and Sophia slid her arm into his elbow as they went down the stairs. They walked down towards the coach, and Luke helped Sophia up into it. She turned and looked at him.

“Well,” she said carefully, “that wasn’t too bad.” She sounded surprised. Luke couldn’t blame her. It was surprising, to say the least.

“No,” Luke said. “It wasn’t. Now, where shall we go?”

Sophia smiled shyly. “Shall we go to the inn?”

“Yes,” Luke agreed. “I suppose we should. And tomorrow is the day, then.”

“Yes,” she agreed. She blushed red. Luke took her hand and held it gently. He could barely believe it! He was as stunned as she was. They had the opportunity to wed here, without having to go all the way to Scotland! It was wonderful. He could barely wait until tomorrow.

Chapter 35

Sophia took a deep breath, smelling the scent of summer lavender. Jessie had picked it and arranged it for her to carry with her that day and it stood on the table by the windowsill. She stepped back. She was standing before the lookingglass, wearing a long dress of silk.

"Maybe I need more curls in my hair?" she asked Jessie, who stood in the corner, watching her thoughtfully. Sophia had to admit that she felt a little nervous. She was glad to have Jessie with her.

"My Lady, you look beautiful," Jessie said gently. "Truly you do."

"Thank you," Sophia said shyly. She looked at her reflection carefully. She could see a young woman with wide green eyes and long brown hair, the front of her hair left in a loose ringleted style, while the back was lifted in a well-styled chignon, all set about with a wreath of orangeleaves on which tiny white flowers showed. She was wearing a white dress of plain cut, with small sleeves that were caught just below the shoulder and a sweetheart neckline. The skirt ended at her ankles, showing fine slippers. Her pale pink lips lifted in a shy smile.

She turned towards Jessie, the dress whispering about her ankles as she did, her face lit with a smile. "I think I ought to go downstairs now," she said, then paused. "No. I want to go downstairs now." She wasn't doing anything just because she ought to anymore. Jessie passed her a bouquet and Sophia lifted it to her nose, taking a deep breath. The scent of the flowers – lavender and dandelions – reminded her of the times she managed to get away and run free in the fields, enjoying the summer heat.

“I’ll follow you down,” Jessie said, standing back in the doorway. Sophia smiled at her, feeling her heart fill with warmth. She had seen how many people there were in her life who truly cared for her, and it meant so much to her to be embraced by their love and care.

“Thank you, Jessie!” she said, taking her hand as she passed her. “I’m so excited!” She giggled, laughter rising in her throat. She could hardly believe Luke was out there, waiting, and yet she could believe it. She knew their hearts always beat as one.

She walked down the steps – the inn owners had agreed to keep the taproom empty that day, so that they could leave for the wedding without gawping tavern-goers – and she went down across the drive to the coach, where it waited for her. Jessie climbed in. Jane was already there, dressed in a pink dress. She smiled as Sophia got in.

“You look ever so lovely!” Jane beamed.

“Thank you. It’s so lovely to have you both here,” Sophia murmured.

“Not at all! It’s wonderful to be here. You’re a wonderful lady. I would not have missed this day for anything!” Jane declared staunchly.

Sophia smiled, thinking that she might cry and leave tearstains on her face. She looked up at the ceiling, feeling the wonderful tingle of excitement inside her. She could barely wait to reach the church!

The coach stopped after a short ride – the inn was but half a mile away – and Sophia got out, looking around. Someone had made an arrangement of flowers in the doorway and the doors were open, their

low, arched entrance seeming to welcome them inside.

In the small entrance before they entered the church fully, a tall man was waiting, dressed in a black suit. He bowed low, greeting Sophia happily.

“Lady Sophia! You look beautiful. It is an honour to escort you.”

“Shh,” Jane chided gently. Gilbert grinned, straightening up from his bow. Sophia smiled warmly.

“Thank you, Gilbert,” she said softly. “It is so nice to have you here on this day.”

“I am delighted beyond words to be here,” Gilbert said, looking down fondly into her eyes. “Now…shall we go inside?” He crooked his arm for her to place her hand on his elbow. He was going to play the role of taking her to the front of the church. Sophia took a deep breath and took his hand.

“Yes. Let’s go.” She could barely wait to begin.

They walked up to the front of the church and Sophia felt her heart fill with joy to see so many familiar people there. Jane and Jessie slipped in behind her – she could hear their footsteps on the flagstones, the sound echoing in the hollow space of the church around them. And she could see Mrs. Halford, the cook, and Lettie was there, and one or two other dear and well-remembered faces, but not many. They had agreed on only two or three guests each.

Sophia looked at the man who stood at the front of the aisle, who had turned, regardless of custom, and was staring at her as she walked down between the pews towards him. She felt her stomach tense with excitement. She wished she could see properly through the thin fabric of the veil. She walked towards him with her heart filled with love.

The priest smiled at her as she took her place beside Luke, but she could see nothing and nobody except him, her eyes focused on him where he stood beside her, his hand slipped into her own.

Sophia looked up at Luke as the priest started to read out the vows and she felt like her entire being was suffused with love. She knew that they had spoken their love to each other before this, and that this was only a formality. That moment when they had stood beside each other in a street in London, they had known that they wished to spend the rest of their lives together.

She smiled up at him as he glanced down at her, and she thought that he might be thinking the same thing. They had faced so much together, learned so much together, and now they were standing here declaring their love in the deepest way they knew.

It seemed so strangely quick, the ceremony. Before Sophia knew it, Luke was bending to turn back her veil, and she could finally look up into his eyes, and see his brown gaze warm on her own, his smile, so tender, his eyes full of love.

“You may kiss.”

Sophia closed her eyes as his lips, so gentle and so warm, pressed onto

her own. She felt her heart melt and she drew him against her, and he wrapped his arms around her, holding her close as he kissed her so tenderly, before the congregation.

Then, slowly, they turned and faced them. Sophia felt her soul soar as she saw all those happy faces, all congratulating them, celebrating their joy with them. She looked up at Luke and he was smiling too, and she squeezed his hand and they walked together down the aisle and out to the waiting coach.

“Happiness and prosperity!” someone shouted in the crowd as Luke threw the customary coins, which were caught by the villagers who had turned up to witness the procession towards the carriage.

“Wishes and contentment!” somebody else shouted.

Sophia smiled as Luke took her hand. She waved from the coach, and Luke slipped in beside her. Soon, they were rolling away down the path, the coach moving swiftly as it headed back towards London. Sophia felt her heart fill with excitement as she reached for Luke’s hand. He turned to her, eyes shining.

“Luke,” she whispered.

“Sophia.” He smiled. “I am so happy.”

“And I am happier than I can express!” Sophia giggled. She pressed his fingers in hers and he tenderly drew her against him, his lips warm and soft on hers as they gently explored hers. She shut her eyes, wrapping her arms around him, feeling her body fill with longing and

joy and wonder as he held her, and the coach rattled across the cobbles.

“I love you,” she whispered as she looked into his eyes. She could see his joy reflected there, and the warmth and tenderness that they had always shared, from shortly after they met.

He squeezed her fingers gently. “I love you too,” he said, voice raw.

He drew her into his arms and held her close and she held him tight and knew that she had never felt like this before. She loved Luke absolutely, and she knew that he loved her too. They had both found the most precious gift in the world. Love.

She held him in her arms, and he bent and pressed his lips to her cheek. The coach rolled on, and her heart was filled with light as they moved towards their new life together.

Epilogue

Sophia looked out of the window onto the gardens. She felt peace settle on her heart. She loved the view from this side of the manor – she could see right the way across the gardens to the hills beyond. She still couldn't quite believe that Luke's father, the Earl of Averley, had given them this house as their own.

Averley Park was a small house, set in the Kent countryside about five miles' ride from the main seat of the family, Averley Manor. It was two levels, with a bedroom, a drawing-room, a dining-room and anteroom, as well as a small suite for guests and an attic.

The Earl of Averley had said that, since nobody really used it anymore, it seemed reasonable for Luke to use it whenever he was away from London. While they were in London, they had asked for – and been granted – the use of Westford Heights, provided that the new earl was not in residence. So far, he had not visited it, preferring the country house.

She turned as the butler came in. Luke had brought his servants with him from London, and Sophia was quite glad he had kept his original household. She found that she liked them both a great deal.

"I have set out tea in the downstairs anteroom, My Lady," the butler said, bowing.

"Thank you," Sophia said. "Has Mr. Beaumont returned?"

“He is on his way up the path now, My Lady.” The butler waved a hand in the direction of the door.

“Thank you,” Sophia said. Her heart lifted. She ran down the stairs to the anteroom.

“Luke!” Sophia said, as he came in through the front door.

“Sophia!” he said, wrapping his arms around her and holding her close against him. She leaned against him, feeling her weight press her body against him firmly. She held him tight, her body tingling with the complex, beautiful sensations he aroused in her. “So lovely to see you.”

Sophia smiled up into his face, resting her hands on his chest. He was dressed in a black velvet suit and had a smart new cravat about his neck. The bookshop had started to do better business since he had attended the occasional party, attracting new customers. Gilbert had dragged him off to a few salons, as well – Sophia had been excited to attend – and those had brought even more custom, especially since he could get to know some of the poets directly and start selling their many works.

“I am so happy to see you, too. Tea is set out in the anteroom.”

“Thank you,” Luke smiled, and took off his coat, following her into the small, warm room on the ground floor where they liked to take their afternoon tea. “It was so nice to see Gilbert. I can’t wait to show him our house tonight.”

“Me too,” Sophia said, feeling a little tingle of nervousness flood through her. She had never hosted her own party before! Oddly, though, she felt fairly confident. She knew she would be able to do it.

They drank tea and talked and then they went upstairs to dress for the party. Sophia opened her wardrobe, taking out a fine golden-yellow gown. She pulled the bell, summoning Jessie to help her to put it on. Much to her delight, Jessie had been able to come with her to Averley House, and they spent most of their time there.

“My Lady, you look lovely,” Jessie said, stepping back as Sophia reached for her shawl. The dress was made of silk, and the colour brought out the copper highlights in her brown hair, which was arranged in loose ringlets.

“Thank you,” Sophia murmured. She twirled in front of the mirror, then tiptoed through to the main bedchamber, where Luke was finished getting ready. He looked at her, eyes shining.

“Sophia! You look beautiful,” he said gently. “I love seeing you in such bright colours. They suit you so well.”

“Thank you,” Sophia murmured again, more shyly this time. She felt her cheeks flush. She stared up at him, thinking that he looked so very handsome in his black suit and with his cravat tied in the latest style, his dark hair brushed and shining. “I am so excited about this party.”

“And so am I,” he said firmly. “Not every day I get to attend a party with the loveliest woman in London on my arm.”

“Oh, Luke,” Sophia said gently, her cheeks flooding with warmth as she shoved him gently in the shoulder, a playful gesture. “You do say such things. Well, I get to attend it with such a fine man on my arm.”

Luke went red. “I don’t know,” he murmured.

“I do,” Sophia giggled.

They went downstairs together.

“Luke!” Gilbert almost shouted, as he came into the dining-room. He was dressed in black velvet too, with his chestnut hair well-cut and a white cravat. He shook Luke’s hand, grinning at him happily. “I am just delighted. Sophia, an honour to see you.” He bowed low. Sophia looked up at him warmly.

“It’s lovely to see you too, Gilbert.” She smiled at the young lady who followed him in. “And you too, Amelia.”

“Delighted to see you,” Amelia said, curtseying low.

Sophia felt her heart fill with contentment as the two went into the dining-room to sit down. She was hosting her own party, and it felt wonderful! She was pleased to see Gilbert looking so well – he had been writing in earnest, and his career was doing extremely well. Sophia felt sure it was because he was so joyful with Amelia.

She looked up at Luke as their other guests arrived. They had invited

some of the local nobles whom Luke had liked when he was young, and his brother was also visiting. Sophia felt Luke draw a breath as his brother arrived. She looked up at him, smiling. She'd met him shortly after the wedding, and she found that she liked him a great deal. He wasn't as close to them as Gilbert, but he was a kind, thoughtful man and she was fond of him.

"Good evening, Epsom," she greeted him.

"My Lady. Delighted to see you," he said, bowing low.

They all went through to the dining-room and took their seats. Contrary to custom, Luke and Sophia sat next to each other, rather than Luke at the head of the table, and Sophia at the foot, as might have been customary. Luke smiled at all their guests.

"Welcome! It is grand to see so many of you here."

"Cheers!" Gilbert said. "To Luke, and Sophia!"

"Cheers!" someone else shouted. Soon, everyone was raising glasses. Epsom looked uncomfortable but soon started to relax, joining in with all the rest of them.

"This is a grand dinner," Luke whispered to Sophia, as the first course was cleared away. It had been a soup of greens, and Sophia smiled to herself. It was a recipe she had learned from the cook at her own home, and passed on to the cook here. Fortunately, Luke had been persuaded to take on another member of staff in the kitchen, and their meals were very good. The second course was accompanied by fine

roast carrots, spiced in a way she remembered from her childhood. Her father had loved them.

"Thank you," Sophia whispered back. "I really enjoyed overseeing it."

"I really enjoy it too," he said. "I mean, how well you did oversee it. I'm so lucky." He looked at her fondly, squeezing her hand where it rested beside hers. She smiled up at him.

"So, Luke," Epsom said, dabbing at his lips with his napkin, "I hear Cull refused a duel with you?"

Luke shrugged. "Yes."

"Not sorry for that," Epsom agreed. "Bad lot, that. He's left town. Fled up north somewhere. People say there was some nasty business – he went after a young heiress and her father disapproved of him. He had to leave town because of the disgrace."

Sophia let out a sigh of relief. She had been worried about him. It was good to know that he was no longer able to cause any kind of trouble for them. She leaned back in her chair.

"I am glad," Luke murmured. She put her head on one side. He squeezed her hand again. Epsom helped himself to a slice of bread from the central tray on the table and turned to Luke, smiling.

"Not that I would have worried about you – the most lethal fellow in a

duel that I know."

Luke looked shy. "Not really, Epsom," he said, eyes on his half-finished platter. "No worse than anyone else."

"Luke! No being shy," Epsom teased.

Sophia smiled. It was so nice to see the two brothers such good friends. She had become fond of Epsom, who visited whenever he was in the countryside, and often called on them in town as well.

The dinner wore on, and then they all went upstairs to the drawing-room to play the pianoforte and talk. Sophia leaned back on the chaise-lounge, looking out of the window and up at the starry sky. She could hear the voices rising and falling, smell the scent of perfume and the flowers in the vase on the table. She was so happy.

She turned to Luke with a small smile on her face. "Shall we go outside?" she murmured.

"Yes," Luke said, squeezing her fingers. "I think that an excellent notion."

He stood and she followed him out onto the terrace. They leaned side-by-side on the railings. She breathed in the scent of the night air and looked up into his eyes.

"I love you, Luke," she murmured.

“I love you too, Sophia,” he said. He bent down and lifted her hand, pressing it to his lips. “I love you so very much.”

He drew her into his arms and pressed his lips against hers and they kissed.

Sophia held him close and her heart was full of joy and she knew that love is the most precious thing of all, the one true treasure that lights up all the world.

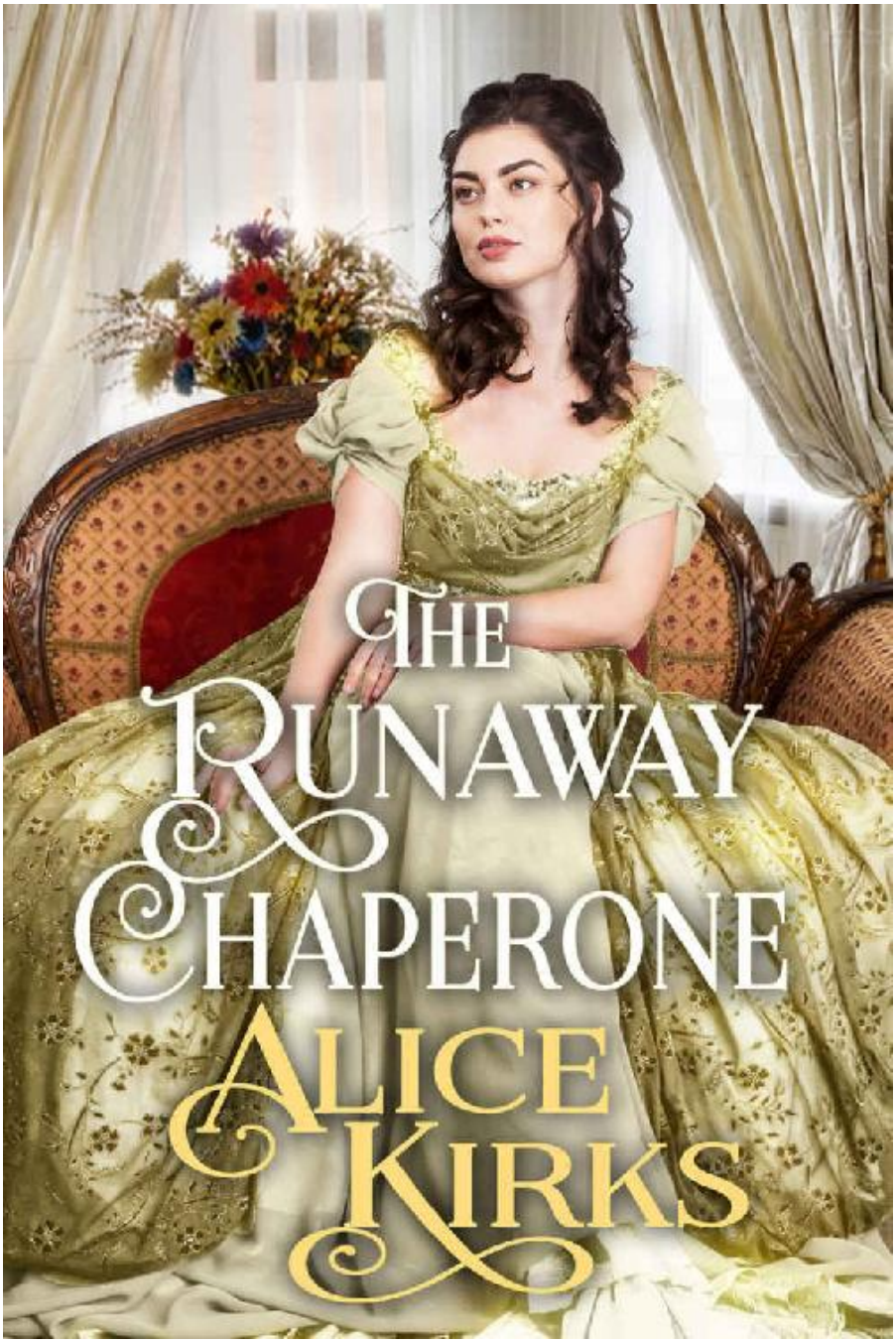
THE END

Can't get enough of Sophia and Luke? Then make sure to check out the Extended Epilogue to find out…

What could the new invaluable additions in Sophia and Luke's life be? In what way will Gilbert and Amelia's life evolve? Will they still be following their passions and lead an unconventional life? What will Sophia's thoughts about not seeing her mother that often be, and what will her mother's life look like now that her daughter has opened a new page in her life?

Click the link or enter it into your browser
http://alicekirks.com/luke

*(After reading the Extended Epilogue, turn the page to read the first chapters from **"The Runaway Chaperone"**, my Amazon Best-Selling novel!)*


THE
RUNAWAY
CHAPERONE
ALICE
KIRKS

The Runaway Chaperone

Introduction

Forced into a loveless betrothal with a man who terrifies her, Alexandra Drake decides to run away from home. As luck would have it, she is then hired as a chaperone for a dashing Duke's younger sister. While it seems to be an easy position for an accomplished woman like her, keeping an eye on the young girl will prove harder than she expected. To make matters more complicated, Alexandra will inevitably find herself falling in love with her charming employee and unable to think of anything else than his captivating eyes... Could Alexandra ignore her growing feelings for the sake of conventional rules? Will true love manage to shine through the emotional whirlwind that has turned her world upside down?

Matthew Lammore has been the Duke of Blakeley since the tragic loss of his parents when he was only fifteen. This entire time, the responsibility of taking care of the estate and his beloved sister has fallen upon his shoulders. However, as his sister has reached the age of sixteen, he will need a well educated person to help her prepare for her debut into Society. Luckily for him, he finds the most appropriate woman for this role, who among other talents, seems to also have a heart of gold. Little did he know though that the beautiful chaperone would exceed her role and end up being the breath of fresh air he has longed for, casting light upon his dull life. This doesn't however alter his awareness of how inappropriate it would be for a Duke to fall in

love with his own employee. Will Matthew defy social norms and give true love a chance? Or will he turn down the woman of his dreams out of fear of ruining his reputation?

The more Matthew and Alexandra fall for each other, the more they realize they are moving towards a tangled labyrinth. As if this wasn’t enough, Alexandra's secret past is haunting her and threatening to tear this blossoming romance apart. Will the two soulmates dare to take the leap of real love and have faith in each other? In the end, will they declare their undeniable feelings, or will they be overpowered by the threatening internal and external obstacles?

Prologue

Alexandra looked out of the window, her dark hair spilling over one eye, obscuring her view a moment. She felt sick, her palms slippery with sweat. She had to move fast.

She tiptoed down the hallway to her bedroom, opened the door and reached for her suitcase. She didn't need to think about packing now; it was ready, a week of careful planning going into this escape.

Her hands were slippery on the handle of the case. It was the one chance she had.

Now.

She gripped her suitcase, went along the long corridor and ran down to the front door.

"Go, go," she urged herself as she shut the door. She had escaped detection, but now she had to move! There was every possibility that someone would see her in the street. She had to run.

She looked down the darkening street, running briskly, aware of the danger all around now. It was not that late, but the nights descended faster as the year moved to wintery cold and frost. She drew her cloak around her.

“Hey there!” a man shouted as she stepped into the street. Freezing with fear, Alexandra turned to stare at him, but he was only shouting because she’d got in his way. Heart thumping, she ran up the street, joints aching at the weight of the heavy suitcase. She’d barely taken anything with her, but the suitcase itself – big and cumbersome – was hefty.

I need a coach to take me away from here, and fast.

The first coach was battered and dark-varnished with no insignia; the coach of one of the drivers who gave lifts to people about the city for a fee. Alexandra swallowed hard. Aware of how dangerous it was for a woman to travel on her own, she scratched in her purse to find the coins.

“Here,” she said, passing them up.

“In you get, then,” the driver said, checking the coins and counting them.

Alexandra gritted her teeth, aware that every second was immensely important, then hauled her case into the coach. She put it down and shut her eyes, content now the door was shut.

She was out of the house and safe. All she needed to do now was get away.

Every second was the difference between danger and freedom.

The drive was short, but it was already starting to get dark, the sky black against the flare of lamplight in the windows of public-houses as they went swiftly past. Alexandra felt her heart thump fearfully as they stopped.

“Here you are, lass,” the driver said. “Now, you’re sure you’ll be all right?”

“Yes,” she said.

There were people all over – some smartly-dressed gentlemen and ladies in big cloaks, and some men pushing barrows from the edge of the square, or carts with nightsoil. She felt frightened.

“Does the stage-coach stop here?” she asked a group of people, standing near a fencepost. Their faces shone in the lamplight from a nearby window.

“No…we’re waiting for the Last Judgement,” the man retorted.

Alexandra grinned, her ready humor unable to resist the joke, even in this danger. “The coach is good enough for me. Thank you.”

She still had a long drive to reach Blakeley and the job she had taken there.

She stood with the people and, when the coach arrived, she let the

driver take her luggage. She sank gratefully into the back and shut her eyes, desperate for sleep.

The lifting and rolling of the coach soon set her into a drowse. She recalled the afternoon – the interview with the Duke's chief of staff had been surprisingly simple, despite her terrors. Not that she would have expected the questions to be that difficult – her aim was to work as a chaperone for the Duke's sister. She had felt lucky to hear about the opportunity.

Alexandra opened one brown eye as the coach went over a bump, then shut it again, sleepily. She had some idea of what the job would entail, and oddly she wasn't too nervous – she felt sure that a young girl could be a pleasing companion, and the age-difference was only eight years. At four-and-twenty years old herself, she would be a friendlier chaperone than the young girl of sixteen might expect.

"Here we are, Miss…Blakeley Heights."

She looked up at Blakely Heights as she walked from the coach. She could see the edges of the building against the sky – it was three floors at least, crowned with imposing turrets. As she got closer, she saw windows glinting in the dark night, though it was all unlit, save a torch burning by the front door.

"Good evening?" she said, waiting for the butler to greet her as he opened up.

"Are you the governess?" he asked.

Alexandra swallowed. “I am the chaperone…Alexandra Ilfield, yes.”

“Oh. In you get, then,” he nodded, jerking his head at her. “Let’s have your bags…you get yourself upstairs. Mrs. Watford will deal with you.”

“Thank you,” Alexandra said, a touch stiffly. He was really terribly rude! She tried to ignore the tingle of fear down her spine as she went inside.

She looked around. The hallway was marble-floored, the ceiling soaring above them into darkness. The stairs were broad, and faced with pale stone that gleamed in the light of the lamps.

“Good evening,” the housekeeper greeted her when she reached the top floor. “You’re the chaperone, are you not?”

Up here, the scenery was quite different – the beauty of the hallway had altered drastically: the walls were bare wood, the floor uncarpeted, the lamp bracketed to the wall sputtery with poor-quality oil.

“Um, yes. Good evening,” Alexandra said hesitantly.

“Here’s your room. Now, we put you right on the top floor, so there’ll be no sneaking out late. You understand?”

“I beg your…” Alexandra began. The woman sniffed.

“You’re a servant, like one of us – don’t care how fancy you think you are ‘cos you get to sit down with the nobs. You’ll be answerable to me.”

Alexandra felt her cheeks pale, insult and anger rooting her to the spot.

“I don’t think anything of the sort,” she said instantly. “I’ll go and rest now, if you please…I had a long journey and I’m tired and whatever *I think* of someone, I think it’s best not to treat them appallingly. Goodnight.”

She walked past the woman and into the room, shutting the door behind her.

She heard the woman gasp, and then the sound of her approaching the door.

As soon as she’d gone, Alexandra opened the door. She had to find her bag!

She heard swift footsteps coming towards her and stopped.

A man in a black suit stopped too. He was tall, with sandy hair and a long, firm-jawed face. He had a high cravat about his neck, fashionably fastened, and his body was lithe and strong, the long jacket and velvety breeches showing his firm muscle. He looked at her

with mild surprise. It was his eyes that held her attention, though – dark, wide and cool, they drew her in.

"Um…" Alexandra tried to think. "Good evening. I'm looking for my suitcase?"

"Ah. The butler, Mr. Denning, has it. If you can wait here, he'll give it to you. Please don't disturb me further…the house is full of guests now."

"Oh." Alexandra stared at him. He was already walking away, his tall back turned to her.

"Here you are, Miss," the butler said, heaving her suitcase to the foot of the stairs. "I'll take it up for you. Now, I trust you found your sleeping-place?"

"Yes, I did," Alexandra said. "Thank you."

"No trouble, Miss. Good night."

Alexandra nodded to him and shut the door. She closed her eyes. Every moment was worth it, for a life of freedom.

As she rinsed her face and tucked her dark hair back into a bun for sleeping, she found that, despite all the fears of the day, the one thing that stayed on her mind was her meeting with the dark-haired man. She presumed he was the Duke, and he was, she thought, quite

handsome, even if he was quite distant. His manner had been confusing – at once rude and not too unfair.

She fell asleep wondering what would happen tomorrow.

Chapter 1

Alexandra woke, stretched, and took a moment to tuck a strand of hair behind one ear. She didn't feel too tired, and she'd slept heavily following her escape. She studied her reflection in the distorted, silvery mirror on the wall. It was a small looking glass, but one part of it worked reasonably well and it showed her a long oval face with a graceful dark brow, a slim nose, and pale skin. Her eyes were wide and black-lashed, and she thought their dark depths looked frightened.

"Now, there's no good in being frightened. You're safe here," she told herself.

She nodded. She was safe here and, when she was dressed in her high-necked cream gown with its long, starched sleeves, she felt sure nobody from home would recognize her.

"That's silly," she giggled. Nobody from her home would ever think to look here. Besides, she reasoned, they wouldn't think about the possibility that she would have been given this job.

She knew, though, that she was well-prepared.

"Good morning," she greeted the butler briskly, walking past him as she headed down the hallway. "Can you tell me where the schoolroom is, please? And where I might find breakfast?"

"Yes, Miss. Schoolroom's over there. Breakfast's downstairs. I thought

you said you weren't a governess?"

"I'm not," Alexandra said, nodding. "But, if Lady Arabella and I will be friends, we should have a good understanding of each other. And part of my job is to prepare Lady Arabella for society, is it not? So, we shall be spending a good part of each day in here, studying important materials and skills."

The butler gawped. "Yes, Miss."

Alexandra grinned as he walked away. It felt like a victory, if a small one.

She went into the schoolroom and sat down at the desk.

"Books. What do they have, I wonder…they have Byron? Yes. Good, and Shelley. And…well, there are a lot of books about the Continent in here…I wonder who reads those?" She ran a hand down the wood, staring at the books that lined the shelves.

The Duke, she reckoned, must be a strange man if he had prepared all these for the education of his sister. Most men, she imagined, would wish their sisters to present themselves in society, and not to be thoroughly learned on the grounds for the Napoleonic conflicts! She found herself smiling.

What would he have said if he'd been the one hiring her, she wondered?

Her stomach growled, and she was just standing up to find breakfast when she heard footsteps in the hallway.

“Now, Arabella…don’t run…”

“Brother! I can’t help it!” a high voice replied. “I’m so excited! Oh, where is she? Where is Miss Ilfield?”

Alexandra swallowed hard, hastily turning to the door. A small, brown-haired bundle exploded into the room, wrapping her arms about her. Behind her walked the man from the previous evening. Alexandra stiffened.

“Alexandra!” the girl said, looking up. “Oh! Here you are. I may call you that, yes? Only, Brother thinks we must be formal. We don’t need to be formal…you’re to be my confidante. And you do look like an Alexandra, don’t you? So tall and pretty!”

Alexandra grinned. She had expected Arabella to be shy, difficult, and possibly spoiled. Here, she was holding the hand of a happy, grinning girl who looked up at her wide-eyed. She was delightful! Her fear of the dark-haired man was forgotten. She grinned.

“Arabella…don’t be…”

“Yes, brother.”

To Alexandra's surprise, he nodded respectfully to her. "Good morning, Miss Ilfield. You have just met my sister, Lady Arabella. Arabella, yes, this is Miss Ilfield. I am sure that, with her permission, you may call her by her first name?" He looked at Alexandra.

"Yes," Alexandra said at once, her gaze dropping to the young girl.

"Oh! Hurray! Brother don't go yet…you must promise to take us into the village someday. I can't wait to show Alexandra all the shops there!" Her green eyes opened wide, large in her slim, pretty countenance.

"Yes, Arabella," the Duke said. He was clearly discomforted. "I shall take you there when I have a spare day. Now, if you'll excuse me, I must eat my breakfast. I have to go out with Albert later – we are going to discuss the shipping-trade."

"Oh, brother…well, I shall be here with Alexandra, and that'll be so much better than having to wait for you for hours to get back! I'll see you at breakfast in a moment…has Alexandra had breakfast?"

Alexandra, feeling her stomach rumble, gestured awkwardly. This beautiful youngster couldn't possibly expect her to dine with them!

"Um…I'll organize it," she said.

"Fine!" Arabella smiled. "Now, if you'll excuse me, Alexandra…I must hurry. Matthew is going out soon and I want to have breakfast before he goes!"

“Of course,” Alexandra nodded. The Duke, in the hallway, seemed relieved. Matthew. His name was Matthew. Alexandra nodded to him.

What an odd pair.

She felt her heart warm at the thought of Lady Arabella – her young charge was wonderful! She had only met her for a few minutes, but she already felt surprisingly fond of her. And the Duke…

She bit her lip. What could she think? Handsome, yes, he certainly was, but she had no idea to his character. He was fond of his sister, though, and that showed he couldn’t be as bad as his manner suggested.

“Miss?” a maid said, appearing at the door. “Mr. Derring wanted to know if you’d be joining us for breakfast? Only it’s almost time to pack up.”

“Oh!” Alexandra nodded swiftly. “Yes. I’ll be down directly.”

The kitchen downstairs was oppressively hot and crowded, and nobody was friendly. She had felt the need to eat alone. She took some bread and tea back to the schoolroom.

She looked up as somebody knocked.

“Miss Ilfield?” the Duke said and bowed. “I must request a talk with you. I had no opportunity to interview you myself, but of course I wish to discuss the support of my sister.”

“Yes, of course,” Alexandra agreed, getting up from the desk. She stared at him in surprise. She had absolutely not expected him to come in here, much less to talk to her alone. Such an important person would surely have other things to do than interview the chaperone?

The Duke drew back a chair and they both sat down. Alexandra faced him, heart thudding.

“What do you view as your role, Miss Ilfield?” he asked. His voice was serious, his expression closed, as if she were standing accused before a court. Alexandra felt a shiver run down her spine. It wasn’t nerves, though – she didn’t really understand what she was feeling. Whatever it was, it was making her heart thump and palms sweat with anticipation.

“I view my role as a support and companion for your sister, but someone who is able to guide her and teach her the skills necessary to make a good impression in society. I will train her in the arts, languages, and comportment, as well as be a friend and a caring ear for when she chooses to give confidences.”

“I see.” The Duke nodded. He seemed impressed. “And what will you do for this…education?”

Alexandra stiffened. “I have decided on a broad curriculum, encompassing modern literature, French and German, as well as tapestry, art, and of course flowers.” That was, she reckoned, the appropriate sort of lesson.

“I see.”

Alexandra stiffened. He seemed amused, and she wondered what was making him smile so condescendingly.

“Your Grace?” she prompted.

“Art is born of observation and investigation of Nature,” he murmured, seemingly to himself.

“You needn’t quote Cicero like that,” she said, one brow lifting. “I think it does him little credit to mumble his words softly.”

“*You know* Cicero?” the Duke’s head jerked up. He looked interested.

Alexandra raised a brow still further. “I said to your household head in London that I am well educated. I trust it need not be pointed out that I meant I have a basic knowledge of literature, old and modern.”

“Yes, but…” the Duke countered. “I am sure the position does not require a thorough literacy in the old masters?”

Alexandra tried not to snort. “On what hooks must we hang modern literature, except on the workings of the old masters? How, pray, must I teach a subject like poetry, without reference to the works of the

ancient scholars?”

He stared.

“Upon my word,” he murmured. “I had not expected someone so… well…ready with her thoughts.”

Alexandra frowned. She wasn’t sure what to say about that. On the one hand, she felt a flare of pride. On the other hand, she wasn’t sure what he had been expecting. Surely, he wanted someone who could provide the best possible education for his sister? She also felt confused. Had she somehow made him reconsider because of her educated ways? She needed him to take her on!

“I trust that you were thinking of her education when you sought a companion?”

The Duke shrugged. “I suppose so. Her education, her comportment, and, above all, her protection. I am trusting you, Miss Ilfield. I hope you are aware of the trust I place in you as her chaperone?”

Alexandra nodded. “I am.” She looked up at him, wondering at the serious expression on his face. He surely trusted her to be of good character? The rudeness of the butler and the coldness of the servants towards her made his suspicion feel even worse. “I believe that, the longer I work here, the clearer it will become that I do not disrespect my position.”

The Duke raised a brow.

“I trust you don’t,” he said firmly. “Should I even suspect you took these matters lightly, you would not hold it for long. Good day, Miss.”

Alexandra stared as he stood and walked out of the room. She couldn’t believe it!

“What was that?” she murmured, watching him leave. He walked down the hallway and she listened until his footsteps were fading. “Why did he do that?”

She stood and went to the window, seeking peace. The schoolroom looked out on a lawned area, the green rectangle surrounded by hedges, still in sunshine. It all seemed small from up here, though she could guess the grounds of the estate were vast.

The house itself was extremely stylish and well-appointed; even here, the bookshelves were made of fine wood and the wide windows allowed light to enter. She had never seen such a graceful, refined home.

“It’s not all bad,” she told herself firmly, turning to go back to her room. “In fact, this is a fine place and you’re so lucky to be here.” She nodded.

She had escaped her home – which was the main object – and, not only that, she’d landed in a home where she could use her gifts, she was well-cared-for, and she even had books to read. The difficulties with the other staff and the fact that her room was drab and almost windowless were minor concerns.

And the fact, she thought mildly as she went up the stairs, that her employer was an oddity was something that would impact her little. It was his sister she was going to see every day, and he seemed to approve of her for that. She would see very little of him from now on, of that she was sure.

She was determined to enjoy herself here, and the Duke being difficult was not going to deter her from that goal.

Chapter 2

The fire was burning merrily in the grate in the study – a little over-merry since the butler looked flushed when he came in and rolled up his sleeves instantly. Matthew hardly noticed.

"What have I done now?" he murmured to himself.

He had expected someone educated, perhaps, when he received a chaperone into the house; he thought maybe she would be able to speak French, read music, and possibly would have read the modern authors – but the new chaperone was entirely different to what he had expected!

She would, he thought with a grin, be teaching his sister the classics, poetry and art, and probably enough for her to study Classics at Cambridge. It was, well…probably too much. He had wanted her to be able to have some basic knowledge so she could talk with people, that was it.

"I don't know what I think of this."

He rested his head in his hands. The impact of Miss Ilfield was strong. Her mind was sharp and funny, and he had, he confessed, enjoyed talking with her. But he didn't want her making his sister turn her back on society and lock herself away with her books! He worried about his sister and he took his job as guardian seriously.

And, he had to admit, Miss Ilfield was not displeasing as far as looks

went, either. He blushed and pushed the thought of her fine red lips, moist and welcoming, aside. She was most certainly not someone he could think of like that.

He reached for the Gazette as even the collection of gossip, speculation, and bad news it usually offered would be good to keep his mind off the problem of Miss Ilfield.

“Your Grace?” Mr. Denning said, coming in. Matthew looked up, frowning. Was it teatime already?

“Yes?”

“Your Grace, Lord Almerton is here. Should I send him to the anteroom?”

“No,” Matthew shook his head, shocked at the idea. “Show him in now, please. I will speak to him here at once.” He’d been so absorbed in interviewing the governess that he’d almost lost track of the fact that Albert was supposed to be arriving. He hadn’t remembered he was visiting.

“There you are!” Albert greeted, grinning at him as he came in. “Perdition take me! I thought you must be ill. You’re usually somewhere about.”

Matthew grinned. “I must admit I forgot about your visit. I was addressing some difficulties in the staff. If you’d like to go up? It’s good to see you.” He nodded to Albert, who smiled and followed him to the door.

Matthew looked the drawing room, wondering at the spindly wooden furniture. It was, apparently, made by a famous maker of furniture, even though he himself would have preferred something more solid. Arabella had insisted that it was all the rage, and he'd let her have her way, deferring to her greater knowledge of fashion

"Of course," Albert nodded. His brown eyes shone merrily. He was a thin fellow with a lively nature that matched his fiery red hair. He had been Matthew's best friend since university. They lived fairly close, too, Albert having his manor an hour away. "So," Albert said as they went into the drawing-room. "How are you and the household? I trust the difficulty's not serious?"

"Oh?" Matthew shrugged. He'd forgotten saying that. "No…just some new staff-member I wanted to interview. For Arabella. You know, one can't be too cautious."

"No," Albert nodded. "I must say, you do a fine job. Looking after your young sister by yourself cannot be easy, old fellow."

"No," Matthew agreed. "It isn't."

He had been Arabella's guardian since their parents' deaths when he was just fifteen or so. His sister had been five then, just a child. Now, he had been the Duke for nine years, and Arabella was almost ready to debut into society. He was desperate to look after her.

"London society is quite rough now," Albert observed, looking up thoughtfully.

“Rough? Well, I know what you mean, mind.”

It was rough for a sixteen-year-old girl.

Matthew tried not to worry for Arabella – he had a lot to think about today, and plenty to discuss with Albert. However, he found his mind returning to the chaperone and the problem – if he could call it a problem – of her being over-qualified for everything.

“Um, Albert,” he said after about an hour of holding his tongue. They had been talking about investing in rope, and he had missed most of Albert’s excited speech – he had been too busy thinking of his particular concern. “Would you say it would be a dangerous thing for Arabella to study the classics? And, well…other learned things?”

Albert gaped at him, and Matthew felt instantly foolish for having asked it. “Why, I think it would be a grand thing! Far from doing harm, it would broaden her mind and give her interests outside the Ton. It’s a lot easier to ignore all the criticism if you have something else to absorb you. Like, say, interest in economy! When I’m thinking about rope, or tea, or whatever else I want to invest my money in, I don’t care what Lady Amery thinks of my cravat, or if I’ll be allowed back into Almack’s this season.”

Matthew had to laugh. “You’re right, Albert. Thank you. I had not thought of it in that way before.”

“No trouble, ask me anything, at any time.” Albert beamed. “What I was asking you, though, is if you could put in just five percent into

this ship we're making? Just five. And the returns will be threefold! I feel certain."

"I'll think about it," Matthew promised.

Their talk turned to other things. Albert ran a hand down his face wearily.

"The crime in London is increasing, Matthew," he said. "I…well, I hesitate to walk abroad of an evening. And we don't live so far away, either."

Matthew nodded. "What about this new Watch? Aren't they supposed to keep the peace?"

"Yes," Albert agreed wearily. "But they're only men, too…there are so many thieves and footpads about! One can't be too careful."

"No," Matthew agreed, swallowing hard. He started to feel uncomfortable. He really didn't need Albert worrying him like this – he spent a good part of every day worried about his sister's safety anyway!

"And I heard the other day that…" Albert began.

"Now stop it, please, Albert," Matthew said swiftly. "Can't we talk about something more positive?"

“Oh! Of course, old chap. Have you seen the stocks in the tea-trade? So strong!”

Albert left after an hour – he had to settle some staffing problems of his own, he said, namely the hiring of a new cook for his hunting-estate. He rode off, leaving Matthew to find Arabella.

They met upstairs over tea.

“What do you think of her, brother?” Arabella asked.

“I think she will be a good companion for you,” Matthew said firmly. He felt his cheeks redden. He liked Miss Ilfield, he had to admit, but he wasn’t going to tell his sister. He couldn’t risk Miss Ilfield knowing he hadn’t disapproved of her easy conversation. He felt it was important to maintain distance with the staff.

“Isn’t she lovely?” Arabella grinned. “And she reminds me of you, a bit – so funny and clever.”

Matthew beamed.

“Thank you, Arabella,” he said. He found himself blushing. “Did you talk to her about the tea-party?” He had hoped to have a chaperone ready for Arabella’s first public event.

He found himself wondering what the chaperone thought of him.

“Oh! You mean the one you want me to go to? Oh, yes! She said I could wear the white muslin, if I liked, and she would be sure to check that I knew my etiquette. She joked about it, though. She’s so funny! I like her.”

“I trust she didn’t take it lightly,” Matthew asked, feeling worried once more. The chaperone was there to keep his sister safe, above all things, and he had to be sure of her character.

“Oh, brother! You don’t have to be so serious, do you?” Arabella asked. “But no. As it happens, she didn’t seem to scorn etiquette. Not a bit. So, you needn’t worry.” She reached for her teacup and poured more tea.

Matthew smiled. “I trust you, sister. Truly, I do.” He put aside his tea. “I know that you would never wittingly be rude or offensive. It’s not you I worry about – it’s everyone else.”

“Oh, brother. The whole of London isn’t full of scoundrels and rogues. Is it?”

Matthew shrugged. “I can’t say.” He swallowed his tea. He had to admit that, since becoming the only thing Arabella had approaching a parent, he’d become overly aware of the dangers of the world. He truly had started thinking of London as a pit of corruption, but she forced him to think rationally about it, and he found that it couldn’t be true. After all, he was also a Ton member, and he wouldn’t hurt anybody.

“I am so excited!” Arabella giggled. “Oh, brother! I can’t wait to wear my new dress. And Alexandra shall be there! Won’t it be fun?”

“Yes,” Matthew said, glad to have the subject changed. “Yes, it will be fun.”

He would, he decided, just have to keep a close eye on Miss Ilfield and make sure that she was not a bad influence for his sister. Arabella already trusted her, and that meant she must be even more responsible and reliable than he had thought.

Chapter 3

Alexandra sat down at the desk in the schoolroom. Though she knew her job was explicitly not as governess, she found that she gravitated to the room with its shelves of books and its airy brightness. It was the only place in the house, too, where she felt comfortable. In her own bedroom, she felt out-of-breath, and in the drawing-room she felt unwelcome.

She was surprised, as she sat there with her books, to find her mind drifting to the subject of Lord Blakely. How strange it was that he kept on returning to her thoughts again and again.

“Miss?” the maid said, coming to the door. Alexandra recognized her from dinner the previous evening – she’d been sitting across from her, eating soup – but she couldn’t yet recall her name. “The room should be empty at lunchtime…we’re going to be cleaning in here, and it’s best if you and your young charge aren’t in here then.”

“Thank you,” she nodded.

Chaperone was, she thought a little sadly as the maid curtseyed and turned to go out again, a difficult position to hold. She wasn’t a servant – or not in the same sense as those who cleaned the house or made the dinner – but at the same time, she was also not part of the family, however close and sisterly Arabella might seem to her.

“It’s just good to be safe,” she reminded herself.

She found herself thinking about him again, recalling the interchange of the initial interview. He had been so strict! And the way he'd talked, as though he half-expecting she would steal the crockery! She felt herself blush as she recalled the fact that, however tedious he was, he did have rather lovely soft brown hair.

"Alexandra! There you are!" Arabella said, walking lightly over to the desk. Alexandra hadn't even heard her footsteps in the corridor. She looked up as her young friend sat down.

"What is it, my Lady?" Alexandra asked. She studied Arabella's face – pale, but lit from within, her eyes sparkling.

"Nothing! I just wanted to find you. I was thinking about what you said yesterday, about knowing the *right way* to do something. I was confused, because sometimes there isn't a right way to do something. I mean, there's lots of ways to tie a bow, or lace a bodice, or…"

Alexandra grinned. "Yes, there are. I think that the only times there is 'a right way' is when it matters to do it in a way that people agree on doing it. With tasks you do by yourself, or for yourself, you should do them the way that's best for you."

She had to admit that she already liked Arabella as a pupil – her mind was lively and engaging, and she had a tendency to think thoroughly about topics. Her thoughts did wander a great deal, though, which made it hard to focus on any one thing.

"Oh!" Arabella clapped her hands. "Isn't that splendid! Now, I'm going to go out riding. You like riding? I love riding! I have a wonderful horse. Her name's Princess. You'd love her too. Would you like to meet her? But you can't wear that outside…it's too cold! Have you a

cloak?" Arabella was already on her feet, going to the windows.

"My Lady…" Alexandra said patiently. "Weren't we meant to be discussing modern writing?" She had made the agreement with Arabella the day before that they would spend an hour in the schoolroom every morning, after breakfast. Just an hour, she'd assured her young charge, and she seemed to have agreed to it – at least yesterday.

"Oh, that's *so boring*," Arabella flapped one hand. "I don't want to talk about modern writing. That's all silly stuff. I like riding!"

Alexandra felt her lip lift in a smile.

"Is it silly?" she asked. "Are you sure? What about Shelley? Is his writing boring and tedious?"

"Oh! No…" Arabella's mouth dropped into a small 'o' of shock. Alexandra grinned. Shelley – the famous poet – had clearly captured Arabella's imagination, just as he had most of the population of London and England – certainly, most of the female population.

"Well, then," Alexandra grinned. "Maybe poetry isn't always fun...but what about *Zastrozzi*?"

"Oh! His novel? I read it," Arabella said, flushing. "Matthew would be shocked."

“He would?” Alexandra was amused. Why would Shelley’s poetry be acceptable, but his novel – which, even Alexandra had to admit, was exciting and arresting rather than serious – was not? The Duke must be a strict person.

“Oh, yes! You won’t tell him, I’m sure. It was a fun book, though…I’m sure you liked it too.”

“I did,” Alexandra grinned. “Though I probably wouldn’t have told anybody that, either.”

They both chuckled. It would, they agreed, be their secret. They talked readily about literature. Arabella agreed that of all modern literature, Shelley was her favorite. She liked Byron, but she felt he could be a bit political, and politics was tiresome.

“It always makes people angry,” Arabella said, frowning.

“People feel strongly about how their country should be governed, which is understandable, I think,” Alexandra said gently.

“I suppose,” Arabella said. “But can’t we all agree on it? Surely all people want the same things?”

Alexandra smiled. “Now that, my dear friend, is a topic that philosophers have debated for centuries. We could reference Aristotle, or Socrates, or even the French school – Voltaire, for example – for our answers. Shall we have a look at what they said?”

“Yes,” Arabella agreed.

Alexandra reached for a piece of paper and something to write with, suddenly feeling familiar and comfortable.

“And so,” she was explaining after an hour, “I think that there is no general rule about ‘what everybody wants.’ Some suggest it’s knowledge, some material comforts, some a sense of purpose. I…do we have the windows open?” she asked, looking up as something moved.

“I opened the door,” Lord Blakeley said.

Alexandra stared as he walked in, striding across to the desk after shutting the door behind him.

“Oh!” Arabella jumped up. “Oh, brother! I didn’t know you were coming in! Alexandra and I were just having a diverting talk. And I want to go and try on my new dress, for the party. Will you stay?”

“I will,” he nodded. “Excuse me, Miss Ilfield. I couldn’t help interrupting. I was wondering if you had intended to discuss the reason for life?”

“No,” Alexandra countered, feeling nettled by his having been standing outside the schoolroom for some time. “I hadn’t. We were discussing what people want.”

“Isn’t that the same thing?”

Alexandra shook her head. “No…I wouldn’t have thought so. The purpose of life, and human endeavor…could they be the same thing? That itself asks many important questions.”

“It does,” Lord Blakeley countered. “Is my purpose here to do what I want? Probably not.”

Alexandra was surprised to see how bitter he looked. She frowned. The look was only there for a moment, and it was gone the instant Arabella laughed happily.

“I thought you were out! It’s grand to have you here.”

I also thought he was out, Alexandra thought gloomily. She had thought she’d heard his horse running. She had felt freer to talk when she had assumed he wouldn’t be there to listen; as somehow, she felt he didn’t hold with educated women.

Though he did agree that he wanted his sister educated. And he seems so serious sometimes…

“Sister, I’d be delighted to see your new dress, if you want to show me,” he said, turning to Arabella, who gazed up contentedly. “What I actually wanted to do was tell you some good news; I came to tell you we’d be receiving no guests. Do you want to dine upstairs?”

“Oh! Yes! That *would be* merry!” Arabella said. She looked up hopefully at her brother. “Brother…what about Alexandra? Is she welcome, too?”

Alexandra swallowed. The Duke looked as if someone had smacked him. She thought that he wouldn’t want her joining them, and that thought upset her.

“Is that what you’d like?” he asked. His voice was serious, his expression grave.

She raised a brow. “Is it what I’d like? Or is it part of my purpose here? I’m not sure. I myself see no reason why it should be contrary to my purpose here – these things are not always in dissonance.”

The Duke looked at her, amazed. She grinned. Making him think was rather fun.

“Hurray!” Arabella said, heedless of the interchange between her brother and her chaperone. “Shall you come up now, then, Alexandra?”

“It depends on what Miss Ilfield wants,” the Duke said again. He was looking so tense that, after a moment, Alexandra smiled.

“No, Lady Arabella. I will stay here. There’s work I must finish. I will dine downstairs with the others, later on.”

“Oh,” Arabella looked disappointed, and Alexandra felt a sharp pang of guilt. But, when she looked at the Duke, he was looking at her with a slightly-less severe eye than before. She’d made the right choice.

“Well, then,” she said, reaching for her quill, inspecting the end though it didn’t need trimming yet, she knew that. “I will see you after lunch, then, later. Then we can discuss the dress you talked about.”

“Hurray!” her young friend said, squeezing her hand impulsively before running to her brother.

Alexandra looked up at the Duke, who was standing in the doorway. He gazed back at her and she found it impossible to fathom the look he gave her as she left.

She could almost, she thought, think it was affection.

“Nonsense, Miss Ilfied,” she told herself firmly. “Why would he?”

She was his sister’s chaperone. He would certainly never look at her like that.

All the same, as she reached for a book and sat down in the chair by the window, she realized she was smiling. She couldn’t stop thinking about the Duke, and their exchange, and, despite how foolish it was, she had to admit that she rather liked him.

“No matter how peculiar and difficult he might be, or how silly it might be,” she told herself firmly.

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